675,580 Miles

A Portrait of Texas

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TC 660H

Plan II Honors Program

The University or Texas at Austin

May, 2017

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ABSTRACT

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The canon of Texas literature is filled with tales of cowboys and the old west, romantic stories with picaresque heroes and picturesque landscapes. In this collection of short stories, I attempt to follow a more contemporary short story tradition in the mode of realism. These fourteen stories, each set in a different Texas town, depict a diverse set of characters who all identify as Texan.

My goal with this collection is to craft a more up-to-date portrait of the state, examining complex dualities in Texan culture and ideology. These stories touch on themes of generational change, religion, class, gender, and interconnectivity. I want to explore these themes in the contemporary moment, questioning where the current condition of Texas came from historically and where it is headed in the future. Ultimately, I want to revisit the question of identity, asking "what does it mean to be Texan?"

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"There is a growing feeling that perhaps Texas is really another country, a place where the skies, the disasters, the diamonds, the politicians, the women, the fortunes, the football players and the murders are all bigger than anywhere else."

— Pete Hamill

INTRODUCTION

My family moved to Texas when I was two years old. My parents, aside from a six year stay in The Netherlands, had lived almost their entire lives in Texas, so it made sense for them to come back home and start raising a family. I grew up in Houston, between 610 and Beltway 8 on the west side of town. During my childhood and adolescence, I traveled all over the state. Every holiday, we would drive to Corpus, Austin, San Antionio, or La Grange to visit family. Through the Boy Scouts, I spent time camping in Possum Kingdom, Lost Pines, Goliad, and Lake Texarkana. I went to church retreats in Gonzales and Beaumont. With my father I went hunting at Eagle Lake, Oakville, and Zapata. My family spent vacations—many Texans do in fact vacation in Texas—at Bandera, Galveston, and Big Bend. Heck, it was even part of our elementary school's curriculum to take a field trip to San Jacinto for Texas appreciation day.

Over the course of twenty years of traveling across Texas, I learned a great many things about Texas culture and geography. The first thing I learned was this: everyone in Texas knows each other. Every time I've met a Texan in one of the other forty-nine states, we've been able to find a mutual acquaintance within minutes of saying "howdy." If I had a nickel for every time I heard one of my parents say, "it's a small world!" when meeting a Texan friend-of-a-friend, I could have afforded to go to college out of state. Many Texans spend hours on the road every week, visiting relatives, conducting business, and developing relationships across the state. I titled this collection *675,580 Miles* as a reference to the combined mileage of all the roads in Texas. I wanted to suggest a web of connections holding

the state together. Each city is a node in the vast network of Texas, linked together by highways and human relationships.

This is the great paradox of Texas: it is full of diverse people, cultural identities, and personalities, and it is surprisingly connected and homogenous. Henry Rollins summed it up best when he said "Texas is as odd as it is vast." It is a huge state filled with diverse and colorful characters, each of whom has their own story. Perhaps the greatest commonality in each of these characters is simply the fact that they live in Texas.

To write these stories, I drew heavily from my experience living here. Many of these characters are a combination of ten or twenty people that I've met over the years. Some of the events are real, most are purely fabricated. When I exhausted my memories, I took to the road. Over the past year, I've revisited almost every city and town mentioned in this collection. I was fortunate enough to receive a Jim W. Walker Excellence Thesis Grant which allowed me to travel across the state, from Terlingua to Laredo to Port Neches. Over the course of my travels, I gathered cultural and geographic detail as well as many experiences that made it into these stories.

In this collection, I tried to examine different dualities in Texan ideology and look at conflicting notions of Texas culture. I wanted to explore the cultural division between urban and rural areas and the kinds of characters that cross that divide. I hoped to address different notions of masculinity in the state, where the notions appear and how they effect different people. I was interested in generational change: how Texas grows and changes every year, but seemingly stays the same. I wanted to consider economic differences from city to city and town to town. I wanted to look at movement in the state, where people travel and where they live. I wanted to explore religion, how it brings people together and when it pulls them apart.

Overall, I wanted to craft a portrait of the state that is more complex than popular Texan stereotypes. There are very different kinds of people in Texas, but almost all of them identify as Texan. I like to imagine that at some point in their lives, all of the characters in these stories meet one another. Perhaps, these are the stories they tell each other.

Soon I hope to move out of Texas. I've spent twenty years here and I'm ready to live in a different part of the world. One of my impetuses to write this collection was to have a capstone of my Texan experience: a summation of what I've learned about people in the first chunk of my life. I've enjoyed writing these stories, and I hope you enjoy reading them. I don't by any stretch of imagination think that they form a complete portrait of the state—there are more characters to write about in Texas than there are barrels of oil coming out of it—but I've done my best to portray my small slice of Texan experience.

— Connor McCampbell

Katy

Cullen rubs the dryness around in his eyes, wire glasses pressing into his forehead. He wears brand new rubber boots and a camouflage t-shirt, which perspiration has stuck to his broad stomach. Too hot for November. His back adheres to the leather passenger seat. Four-thirty, early morning. Why would anyone choose to wake up this early? He could usually sleep in until eight, eight-thirty, and still make it to the office just fine. He didn't want to come, really, but it was so nice of Ray to invite him. Maybe he and Ray would really bond. Maybe even be friends. Pals? No one this old says pals. Coworkers. Friends. The windshield wipers sweep sweat off the windows. What if all trucks came with seat-back wipers. Wouldn't that be nice?

A few other cars swerve in and out of their lanes, must be drunk people, coming home after a long night downtown. Cullen pulls out a kolache from the white paper bag beneath the glovebox, takes a bite, and recoils at the spice.

They're all jalapeño.

Yeah, says Ray, that ok? He's focused on the road.

They veer off the highway and into a convenience store parking lot. Why meet here? Under the store's florescent lights, there's a stray cat eating out of the trash can. It looks like Sophia, Cullen's calico. He tries to take a picture. His son would like a picture. Another truck waits in the parking lot with a tall, dark-skinned man leaning across its hood with his arms crossed. Ray's headlights distinguish the man's green waders from the black truck.

That's Earl, says Ray. He's the one that put this whole thing together. He's a real good shot. Real good. Good guy too.

Earl looks like a good shot, looks tough. How many are coming?

Justin and some other guy Justin knows. Oh, and the guide. So that's six, counting us, Ray says. I think you'll like everyone, they're all good guys.

Earl is wearing waders. Cullen didn't know they would need waders.

I just brought high boots, you think that'll be ok?

Yeah, I'm sure that'll be fine, says Ray, opening his door. The growl of the diesel engine fills the truck cabin like pasta water, boiling over. The calico circumnavigates a dirty trash can outside the store, meowing at the visitors.

How you boys doing? Earl says.

Real well, real well, Ray replies. Earl, this is Cullen.

Howdy, Earl says.

Cullen didn't bring waders, you think he'll be ok in high boots?

Nu-uh, says Earl, boots'll work about as well as a boat with no bottom. I got an extra pair of waders in the truck he can borrow.

Justin pulls up in a white truck with a camper and mud flaps. Cullen struggles to get the waders over his belly. What if he gets them on and can't ever get them off again? What would his son think, to have a father perpetually in waders? Cullen can't help but laugh at himself. Ray and Earl sip convenience store coffee from cardboard cups. The cat meanders towards them.

Got a call from the guide, says Justin through his open window. He's running late. Said to meet him at the place.

Alright. Let's load up, Earl says.

Everyone dumps their coffee out onto the gasoline stained concrete and gets back into their trucks. The shoulder straps of Cullen's waders bounce at his sides as he jostles around. Cullen can fix the waders later.

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At the lease, the guide holds open the iron gate and spits into the reeds. His truck is parked on the gravel road with its headlights shining through the gate like a flashlight through a fork. They all drive through, no stopping, down the muddy road that cuts between the rice fields, away from the highway. They park the trucks in a line and start to load up under the early morning sky.

There are so many shells in the back of Ray's truck. Boxes and boxes.

Cullen picks a red shell out of one of the boxes. How many of these do I need?

None of those, says Ray, those are twelve-gauge shells. You want these. He points at a case of yellow twenty-gauge shells. Bring two or three boxes, just in case we get lucky.

The sun warms up the edge of the earth, slowly, like an electric oven. The orange glow illuminates the flaws in the seemingly flat horizon: a fence line, a splotch of irrigation equipment. The men don green and camouflaged vests, hats, and netting. They load up their guns and weigh down their vests with heavy steel-shot. A yellow lab wriggles through the mud, darkening its short fur. Where the hell did a dog come from? Justin whistles and the dog bounds over to his truck.
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The guide's name is Darrel. He introduces himself and checks on each man's preparations. He helps Cullen with his waders. The other men probably don't even see. Ray says Darrel is a good guy. Darrel is a good guy.

Darrel leads them three fields over to the duck blind. Distant gunfire sounds like popcorn, quietly popping across the surrounding fence line. Everyone stops at the edge of a muddy pond and starts rearranging gear and pulling wader straps tight. Is that it? The blind? It looks just like a pile of sticks in the middle of the pond.

Cullen turns to Justin. Are we just supposed to walk out to it? What are we, Jesus?

Justin gives Cullen a look. That was a bad joke. Hopefully no one else heard it.

They wade out to the blind, water lapping against their rubber coverings. It sure doesn't smell like rice. You would think a rice field would smell like rice. It just smells like muddy water. They get to the blind. There are two horizontal boards screwed onto wooden pylons, sunk in the mud. One plank to rest the guns on, and another one that looks like a bench. No one sits down. They fill the second board with shells and waterproof bags.

Cullen nods towards one of the bags. What's in the bags?

Hopefully birds soon! says Ray.

Ray has a great sense of humor. The sky is starting to look blue. This is familiar. This is getting closer to the sky Cullen knows. There are so many birds.

Cullen watches the black shapes moving across the horizon. How do we know which ones to shoot?

We just shoot ducks, says Earl. You can tell by the shape. They have long necks with bodies like a bowling pin. And the wings jut out like triangles.

I'll call 'em as they come, says the guide. Y'all just worry about shooting 'em.

Cullen looks around. He doesn't see any ducks. How long until the ducks show up?

Could be a long time, says Justin. But you gotta keep your mouth shut so you don't go and scare them off.

Cullen shuts his mouth. Everyone does. They all stand in a line: the guide, Earl, Cullen, Ray, Justin, the dog, and Justin's nameless friend. They are still. So still. Cullen tries to be still, but it's hard. He shifts his weight, again, and again. He looks all around—no ducks. He looks down the line and sees Justin staring at him. He looks ahead and tries not to fidget. He really tries. But there is a reed poking him in the back, so he turns around and moves it. Now he can hold still. He could hold still, but the reed is back. So he turns around and breaks it. Justin looks at him like he just dropped a dish in a crowded restaurant. Justin's face is sharp under the shadow of his camouflage hat. Cullen looks straight ahead. Maybe the ducks are on the horizon, just one field over. He rocks side to side to keep his legs awake—despite the eighty-five degree air, the water is cold, as if the mud was cooling it from underneath. It has been an hour and a half of just standing, no ducks. The dog starts to get restless, to whine and whimper. Justin keeps saying shut-up and flicking the dog's ears, but it doesn't change anything; it just makes the dog whine more. Finally, he tells the dog to sit, throws a duck decoy out into the water, and then says, bird. The dog takes off after the fake duck, sloshing through the mud and water. It returns with the decoy and sits, alert. A few minutes pass and then Earl whispers, birds.

Don't move, says the guide.

Everyone moves a little bit to get ready.

It looks like they're coming right down, right down to us, says the guide. I'll call it out. I'll call when they're close enough.

Cullen gets his gun ready, slowly, mirroring the other men. He leans it against the wood rail of the blind and takes the safety off, just like Ray showed him.

Getting close now, real close, says the guide.

The ducks circle around three times before approaching the blind.

Ready, says the guide.

Cullen's shotgun goes off, louder than he imagined. The birds spook and bolt, flying every which-way. Everyone looks at Cullen.

Too early, says the guide as he lowers his gun.

No one else has words. Justin's jaw quivers. The dog wags its tail, waiting for a retrieval command. Why did he do that? Why the fuck did he do that? Wrinkles form between Ray's eyebrows. Oh man. He fucked up.

I'm sorry, says Cullen. I don't…

Remember to keep the safety on until you're ready to shoot, says Ray. Until right when you want to shoot.

I'm sorry, I did, I thought I did, I thought you…

It's ok, says the guide. Just wait for my call next time.

They stand there for another hour. No words. No twitching. Cullen stands completely still. Even the dog seems somber. Cullen wonders if this will change things between him and Ray. Maybe every time Ray sees him in the break room, or in personnel meetings, or walking to the parking lot after work, he will remember this moment and blame Cullen for all the ducks he didn't shoot. Cullen looks down the line of seasoned hunters. Each one of them is already focused on the horizon, looking for ducks. Cullen decides to look also. Feeling the

drag of his waders in the water, he remembers how excited he was when Ray first invited him out. They were eating lunch at Guadalajara. Ray ordered the enchiladas Cullen suggested. They talked about work and the marketing department and how Rachel from HR still couldn't remember either of their names. Ray told Cullen about a hunt he went on three weeks ago. Ray said there was fog all over the ground so thick that the geese couldn't see the earth before they landed. He described how sore his shoulder was from shooting three-and-a-half inch steel shot over and over again. Cullen listened and nodded until Ray asked him if he would want to go hunting sometime. Cullen said yes and nodded some more.

Maybe Cullen could still prove himself to Ray. Maybe if Cullen shoots the next duck, then Ray would be impressed enough to forgive him for earlier. Wow, Ray would say to his other friends. Real great shot! Then they could all laugh at Cullen's earlier mistake. Cullen looks down the line again. He can't imagine any of the other men laughing at what just happened. No, Cullen couldn't risk trying to shoot anymore ducks. What if he got too anxious and shot early again? Real fuck up, Ray would say to all his friends. Can't shoot shit. Cullen stared out at the cowbirds on the horizon. Next time the ducks come, if any ducks come, Cullen will hold his gun and look at the ducks. He will look at the ducks and hold his gun up and wait for Ray to shoot. Great shot, Cullen will say. You just blasted that one out of the sky, Ray!

Hey, says the guide, single bird coming.

They all get ready. Cullen makes sure his safety is on. The mallard opens up his wings and floats down in front of the blind.

Git 'em! says the guide.

Earl shoots first, folding up the duck. Justin shoots right after, followed by his friend. Ray clicks his trigger three times, but nothing happens. The duck hits the water like a chicken leg splashing into the fryer.

Bird, says Justin.

The dog jumps out of the blind to retrieve the duck.

Nice shot, Ray says to Earl, I gotta fix this gun, it keeps jamming up on me.

That was my shot, says Justin.

I don't think so, says Ray, it looked like Earl got that one.

I shot that bird, says Justin.

Maybe, says Earl, who's to say. Earl loaded another shell into his gun.

I think Earl shot the bird, says Cullen. He looked at Ray.

No one asked you, says Justin. We sure as hell know you didn't shoot the bird.

The dog brings back the mallard. Blood leaks from three little holes in its white chest. The red disappears in the muddy brown water. Cullen feels a little sick, but makes himself look. It wouldn't bother any of the other men to look. Justin takes the bird from his dog's soft mouth.

I'll keep this one, you can get the next one, says Justin as he packs the duck into his bag.

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They stay in the blind until eleven without seeing any more ducks. Maybe Cullen's first shot scared off all the birds for the rest of the day. Maybe it was his fault they didn't see any ducks. Shit. Well what could he do now? Maybe he could practice a lot before next time
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and shoot a bunch of ducks, he could give them all to Ray — no, there probably won't be a next time. This is probably it for Cullen and Ray.

They wade back through the water and started unloading gear at the trucks. Is that a meow? Did anyone hear that? Is that a meow coming from the truck?

Holy shit, says Ray, bending beneath the truck. Looks like that gas station cat climbed up under our wheel well. I can see its white paws peeking out over the top of the frame.

It's alive? asked Cullen.

Sure is, says Ray, that's amazing. That thing must have been clinging on to our suspension for dear life, we were going what, 75? 80? I'll see if Earl has something we can use to lure it out.

Ray walks off to find Earl and maybe some beef jerky or something. Justin saunters up to the truck, gun in hand.

I got a way to get the cat out, he says. He whistles, taps the truck, and points under the hood.

His dog comes quick, smelling the cat, and barks under the truck.

Git 'em! says Justin.

The cat pops out of the other side of the car. The dog is already there, wagging its tail and barking. The cat hisses and arches its back, fur raised like lightning. Then, quickly, it crumples up in a loud bang. The cat's head tucks between its front legs. Its back legs twitch some.

Everyone ok? yells the guide.

Yeah, says Justin, putting his safety back on. We're fine.

What happened? says Earl.

I took care of the cat problem, says Justin.

Why'd you do that? says Earl.

It was gonna scratch my dog. You saw it Cullen. That's a four-thousand-dollar bird dog, I'm out a lot of money if it looses an eye.

Cullen did see it. His eyes start to water, but he won't cry. Nope, he can't cry in front of Ray and the other guys. Cullen wants to be tough and quiet, but it's hard. He blinks his eyes and stares at the mud. He might be crying a little bit. Not enough for people to notice. He bites his bottom lip and tries to tell himself that it's just a cat and it doesn't matter. He looks at the calico. It looks just like Sophia, but leaking, like the duck.

What's wrong, you fat fuck? says Justin, petting his dog.

Now he cries. Cullen cries hard. Weeping and sniffling and turning red all at the same time. He holds his hands to his face to hide the tears, but they seep out over his round fingers. He shakes so much that he can feel his belly move under the tight waders.

Jesus Christ, says Justin.

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And now everything is quiet and soft and gentle, and the only sound is the repetition of the cracks in I-10. Cullen sits in the passenger seat, back in his new boots. He stares out the window. Nothing. There is nothing out there for him. Just a bunch of dirty rice you can't eat and some ducks you can't shoot. And the cat. The cat is still out there. Cullen is hungry, but all the kolaches are gone now so there is nothing to do but sit and be quiet.

You ok? asks Ray.
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Yeah, says Cullen. He is ok. Also, he is sorry. Sorry he ruined the hunting trip, sorry he made Ray look bad, and sorry that he and Ray wouldn't be friends anymore. Cullen wants to take it all back, never have gone hunting. Just be the nice guy from the office, that'd be ok. He could have just talked to Ray in the break room. That'd be ok. Maybe every once in a while they would go out to lunch together, grab a beer and watch the game, but that would be it.

I'm really sorry about all that, says Ray.

It's ok, says Cullen.

I wouldn't have invited you if I thought things would have been this way.

I know, Cullen says.

You know, Cullen, you're a good guy, says Ray, a real good guy.

The truck drifts home, back to suburbia. Ray turns on the radio. Eventually, they talk about work and life and Cullen's son and Ray's daughter. They talk about how hard it is to be a single parent, how stressful that can be. Ray tells Cullen about a time he went hunting last year and his guide accidentally shot his own bird dog. They joke about Cullen's new boots and wouldn't it be funny if he wore them into the office one day? They make plans to take their kids to the museum and maybe they could all go fishing together sometime, the whole bunch. That'd be nice, and you know what Ray?

You're a good guy too.

Quemado

Mariana works at the Oasis Food Mart. She stands behind the counter and sells ice to a tall man with a Dodge Ram truck and a Trump bumper sticker. His name is Raúl. He buys ice on the weekends. She is always polite, smiling.

"¡Hasta la próxima semana Raúl!"

Down the street from the food mart is the old grocery, which has two gas pumps, the kind that still need an attendant. There are weeds growing in the glass casings and all the numbers are cracked and crooked. Victor Rosales works the pumps. He often takes an afternoon siesta and closes early on Fridays. At least twice a week, travelers will pass through Quemado in need of gas and stop at the grocery while Rosales is absent. Then they come to the food mart to ask if there is any gasoline in the small town.

"Si estaba cerrado, no hay," Mariana says, pointing towards the grocery. "Lo siento." She smiles politely as the disappointed travellers walk back to their cars.

Mariana lives with her husband on a green patch of land off of Del Rio Boulevard. They have no children. He grows oranges. On Saturdays, he fills his truck bed with fruit and drives an hour to Carizzo Springs. He sits with a sign and sells oranges to highway passersby. He tells Mariana how much he loves her. He wants to have a big family one day. He wants to live in their house until they are old and then be buried together in the grove under an orange tree.

"Hasta la muerte nos separe," he says, peeling an orange.

Mariana passes week after week behind the counter, scared of children, scared of the scorched land surrounding their lush grove. Travelers twice a week. Raúl once a week.

Sometimes Raúl comes in on a Friday, tired and sweaty from working in the sun. Other times he comes in on Saturday morning, bright and happy, telling Mariana she has the nicest smile in the whole Rio Grande Valley.

Often, she wonders about the the people that pass through Quemado. Where they are headed. Where they came from. She thinks about going with them, to Corpus or San Antonio, perhaps. They always rush in the door, buy a Gatorade or some jerky, and run out again, barely walking into Mariana's life. She imagines if everyone in Laredo does things with such haste.

Her husband eats supper quickly and then sits back in his chair with his arms behind his head. He watches Mariana slowly chew her rice. He tells her they have everything they need except children.

"Niños corriendo entre los naranjos."

Now and then, Mariana brings up leaving Quemado. She mentions Laredo. She has a cousin there that could get her a job at Mall Del Norte selling shoes. Her husband says it's ridiculous. He can't grow oranges in Laredo.

"Y nuestro Sueño," he says, pointing to the grove.

Sometimes Mariana thinks about Raúl. No children. No wife. Free to travel and make a life of his own. She hands him his change. She wants to slide her arm up his, pull him towards her, let him get close enough to smell the orange scent on her. She wants to get in his truck and drive all the way to Lubbock.

She tells herself she likes Quemado. Likes the quiet grove, the open land, her job at the Oasis Food Mart. She remembers how much she loves her husband, how much he gives her. She imagines him, eighty years old with his arms behind his head, watching her and their three children and ten grandchildren eat around the small kitchen table. She thinks of lying in the ground next to him, forever staring up at oranges.

One night after dinner she asks him if they can take a trip to Laredo, just to see what it's like. He says no. He says she won't like it. There is no point in going.

Mariana imagines how his heart would break if she left him. She thinks about his body, hanging beneath an orange tree.

One Saturday, Raúl walks into the food mart. Mariana's husband is in Carizzo Springs with ripe fruit. Raúl tells Mariana she looks radiant. She smiles and blushes. He holds a ten pound bag of ice. Their hands touch as Mariana drops coins into his palm. Her finger tips start to crawl up Raúl's wrist. Her chest is warm. She looks up at Raúl's face. His brow furrows and his eyes move across her face. His mouth is slightly agape. He squeezes his hand tight around the coins and pulls away from her.

"¿Qué es esto?" He looks down at her trembling hand.

Mariana shakes her head. Her mouth moves, but no words come out.

Raúl tilts his head a bit. "Gracias Mariana." He lifts up the bag of ice and slides the change into his pocket.

Mariana retracts her shaking hand. She can feel her heart pumping, blood rising to color her skin. She hears Raúl walking out the door and back to his truck.

She imagines her husband at dinner, happy about selling so many oranges. She sees the faces of their kids, running through the grove. She feels her life settling into her skin and her eyes well up as Raúl drives away.

That night, when her husband comes home, she makes love to him. Afterward, when she cries, she tells him it is because she is so happy about the family they are starting. She cries when her children are born, when she quits her job to mother full time, when her children get married, and when they have children of her own. Each time, her tears remind her of the warmth of Raúl's skin, the sound of his truck leaving the caliche parking lot, and all the oranges she has ever eaten.

Austin

I didn't always hate Christine McLean. At first, I kind of admired her. She liked long socks and short skirts that showed off her tan thighs. Every day, she wore cutoff cotton t-shirts, and when she raised her arms up you could see a Chinese symbol tattooed on her ribcage, below the curvature of her breasts.

We sat next to each other in freshman Spanish and were partners in every exercise, performing fake conversations in front of the class about what we did last weekend, what the weather was like, or where we last saw Doña Josefína. Christine never took any of the exercises seriously, and she always had the best answers. She would tell the whole class how she got drunk last weekend and woke up on a rooftop in west campus, that it was so hot you could see sweat stains on her shoelaces, and that she saw Doña Josefína just last night, downtown, doing the running man at Barbarella.

The first time I met Christine outside of class was at a co-op party, late on a Friday. Earlier that night, I had ridden bikes downtown with my friend Julia. There was a cool breeze, the kind that amplifies excitement. We saw Mac DeMarco play a killer set at the Mohawk. During the last song he crowd surfed into the middle of the audience and then pulled himself up onto the balcony where we were. After the set he sat onstage, smoking cigs and taking selfies on fans' phones. Julia talked to the bassist, Petey, for a minute. He told her they were playing a secret show in west campus later that night with their other band, Walter TV. We rode back to campus to refill our flasks and then biked over to French House Co-op. The back room of the house was already packed with people, turning about each other like

mackerel. Their bodies smelled like sweat, beer, and weed. After an hour, Mac showed up with the rest of the band.

"You're Mac DeMarco!" I said as he walked up the chipped concrete steps. "I think I touched your butt when you were crowdsurfing at Mohawk!"

He clearly had a few drinks in him. "That's real cool," he said and slapped my hand.

I wanted to tell Julia, but she had gone off to get a beer. I turned around to watch him walk off and there was Christine, kissing Mac DeMarco on the mouth.

"Aly!" yelled Christine when she saw me. "Mac DeMarco!" She gestured towards him.

"Yeah," I said, "we already said hi." Mac walked into the back room and disappeared into the crowd. "Did you go to the show?"

"No, but I heard he was here so I came running!"

We found Julia smushed in a corner the back room with everyone else. Walter TV played an incredibly loud set. We danced and took swigs from a plastic bottle of rum that was going around.

After that, Christine started calling me party girl in class. She finally asked me to hang out with her one afternoon. We smoked a joint in Waller Creek and then walked around the Blanton together. We looked at one of Rothko's untitled surrealist works.

"It's a good thing this guy got big for his color field paintings," said Christine, "cause he can't paint lines for shit."

Christine pointed out every piece of art that looked even remotely phallic. I couldn't keep it together and my loud laughter got some serious shade from the other museumgoers—one older woman made a hissing sound at me—so we left to get food on Guad.

After that we were friends. Most of my other college acquaintances took their studies too seriously to go out on a Tuesday, so Christine became my drinking and debauchery go-to. We went to off-campus house parties and downtown to sneak into bars. We became regulars on the co-op scene, skinny dipping in the pool at Pearl and smoking weed on the roof of Taos. Once at 21st street cco-op, we peed into cups during a Dan Deacon show. The place was packed and no-one wanted to miss a minute of the set. Everywhere we went we took a flask.

We started to hang out so much that my high school friends asked if we were dating. Almost every other night we would find a house party, or a show, or just a new spot to smoke. I took scissors to all my old t-shirts and turned them into crop tops. Our consciences started to meld. We would snicker at the same things and roll our eyes at certain kinds of people. I often knew what Christine was thinking about because I was having the same thought. Other people talked about us as a unit, "Christine and Aly," "Aly and Christine."

Second semester, we took an English class together about the development of the novel. Our professor was tall and handsome. Christine told me one day she would have his kids.

"My babies will be reciting Chaucer before they can walk," she said.

When it warmed up, Christine and I would go to Barton Springs together. We used to swim for a little and then sun ourselves, reading for class on the grassy hill above the pool. We read at almost exactly the same rate. We would laugh together and then look up from the page, knowing where the other one was.

One time we kissed after a party, but it weirded us both out so we promised not to try again.

We told each other everything. Christine told me about how hard it was on her mother after her father left. She told me about all the bad guys her mom used to date. She told me that the tattoo on her side meant "freedom." I told her about the time I threw up after my only high school drinking experience. I told her how I was waiting to sleep with the right guy, not just some college rando. When it rained, we ate ice-cream in bed and watched 90s cartoons.

We decided to get a place together for sophomore year. We shopped around and found a two bedroom apartment in the middle of west campus, between two co-ops. When we toured, the apartment was covered in trash, old food, and still-wet laundry, but the realty agent assured us it would be steam cleaned before move-in, so we signed the lease.

Over the summer, I missed Christine a lot. She went back to California to stay with her parents. I went home to San Antonio and got a job at a bookstore. Most nights we talked on the phone about how much we missed Austin and each other. Christine started seeing some guy she knew from high school, but it wasn't serious. I read a ton that summer and mostly spent time alone. I tried hanging out with high school friends and going to parties with those people, but it was nothing like Austin, and it wasn't much fun without Christine.

School started back up and we moved into our new place. My parents drove up with me to help out because I was supplying most of the furniture. The moment they left, Christine pulled out a bottle of whiskey to christen the new apartment. We spent the night celebrating the end of dorm life.

Something about Christine's face seemed different after that summer. It looked sharper, like she lost all her baby fat. She didn't want to hang out as much, which was fine because I had a heavier course load and needed more time alone anyway, but sometimes, even

when we had something planned, she would bail to meet up with a guy or grab drinks with another friend.

Christine would stay out until two or three in the morning most nights, often bringing guys back to our place. One week she brought a different guy home each night. I worried about her, but when I tried to bring it up she would get defensive.

"I'm just trying to have fun," she said.

She woke me up to ask if I had a condom one night at four in the morning. I yelled at her to leave me alone because I had a midterm the next day.

"Holy shit," she said, trying not to laugh, "I'm sorry. I forgot you don't have sex." She went back into her room giggling and I heard her retell the whole thing to some guy through our thin walls. I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for them to finish having sex so I could go to sleep.

After that night, she tried to apologize.

"I didn't realize you had a midterm, so I'm sorry. We had been drinking, and you know how that goes. Let me take you out for a drink tomorrow!"

"I can't," I said, sliding past Christine to go to my room. "I have a meeting for a group project tomorrow night."

Near the end of the semester I noticed she had started wearing my clothes.

"Sorry," she said, looking down at my LCD Soundsystem t-shirt. "I was in a rush and just grabbed something out of the wash, didn't even realize it was yours."

I went home over Christmas break to spend time with my family. Christine stayed in our apartment. When I came back in January, the place was trashed. There empty bottles everywhere and clothes all over the furniture, half of them mine.

"I'll clean it up, promise," said Christine. "I just had some friends over and didn't realize you would be back so soon."

There was still vomit in our toilet and it looked like people had slept in my bed. Two weeks went by and Christine didn't do anything about our apartment. Finally, I told her that if she didn't clean it I was going to hire a cleaning service and she was going to pay for it. Two days later the whole place was back to normal. We smoked a bowl together on the couch.

"I'm sorry if I've been a bad friend," she said, passing me the pipe. Smoke hung in the air like algae, bobbing in a fish tank. "I miss hanging out with you. I want to go back to the way things used to be."

"Me too," I said. I looked at the colored glass in the pipe, the reds and blues, twisting around each other. "I miss going out together.

We started to do stuff together again. We saw some shows and went to a couple of house parties in Hyde Park. I thought things were getting back to normal, but then Christine started to bail on plans. She had more and more guys over to the apartment. The dishes piled up. Twice I noticed that money I left out in my bedroom had gone missing. Night after night she woke me up with loud music or screaming or thumping through the wall.

"Christine," I said one evening, "this has to stop. You can do whatever you want, but you have to respect my space and my sleep."

Christine's eyes moved around the apartment, surveying the wreckage.

"I can't live like this," I said, pointing to the kitchen, the green mold floating in mugs of whiskey on the counter. "You can stay up as late as you want, but you've kept me up every night this week with your music."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't realize I was being loud."

I couldn't tell if she was being defensive or not.

"Look, I'll clean up the place, I promise," she said. "And if I'm ever too loud just knock on my door or let me know. I can be quieter."

We nodded at each other in silence.

"You should really come drinking with me this weekend," she said. "I know a way I can make things up to you."

That Saturday, I put on a blue dress and some white kicks. Christine used her fake to get us margs at a bar on Guad. We talked about classes and what I had read lately. She said she knew a great party we could go to in west campus. We did a shot together before leaving the bar.

Christine and I walked to a house on the far edge of west campus. It had white siding covered in brown spots and no grass in the yard. You could hear the music two blocks away. We went around the house through a side gate and entered the backyard. There were tons of people hanging about, smoking, drinking, and talking. Christine grabbed my hand and pulled me up some steps and inside the house, into the kitchen. There was a keg surrounded by a handful of kids I knew from liberal arts classes, all wearing round glasses and black pants. Behind them was a tray of cherry jello shots on the counter. Christine convinced me to do one, then another, then another. A guy from our freshman English class, Donald, poured me a beer and the three of us went outside.

"This is Donald's house," said Christine. "He lives here."

"How do you like it?" I asked.

"You know, it's ok," he said.

We made boring small talk for a while about school and the few memories we had from class together.

"Let's dance," said Christine eventually.

Donald followed us back into the house. We set our empty cups on the kitchen counter and slipped past a group of people blocking the path into the living room. There were people dancing shoulder to shoulder, bumping sweaty elbows and hips. The room was dark except for a cheap strobe light in the corner. Christine grabbed my hips and spun me around. The whole room spun with her. I held her hands for support and the two of us stumble-stepped our way to the center of the dance floor, Donald following close behind. Everything felt heavy and I could feel my white shoes getting covered in dance floor smut and spilled beer.

We danced for a long time. The playlist was filled with French house and nu disco. I don't remember Christine leaving, but at some point she came back with more drinks.

"Donald," she said, "show us your room!"

We went to a small room in the back corner of the house. I held Christine's hand the whole way. There was a bed and a desk and an acoustic guitar on the wall. One of Donald's walls was covered in Tame Impala posters. Christine sat me down on Donald's bed and pulled out a joint. The three of us sat in silence and stared at the smoke collecting in front of Donald's ceiling lamp.

"Do you have a bathroom?" asked Christine.

"Yeah," said Donald, "across the house."

"Great," she said. "I'm going to take a piss, grab another drink, and leave you two alone for a little bit." Christine squeezed my knee and left the room.

Donald asked me about my favorite movie. I didn't have a chance to respond before he started telling me about all of his favorite films and why he liked them and why they were undervalued by so many people. The whole room started spinning and I could barely hold on to the conversation. I looked over and realized Donald was staring at me, like a monkey at its reflection, to see if it's real. That's when he kissed me. I didn't stop him at first because I was so surprised, but then he pushed my shoulders down on the bed. He started sliding up my dress and slipping his hands behind my thighs. His lips were uncooked sausages, rolling over my mouth. I told him to stop, to wait. I said no, but he just made a dumb monkey face like he didn't understand and forcing his sausage lips back towards my face. Then I threw up on his bed.

"Oh fuck," said Donald, jumping up from the bed.

I pushed my dress back down and rolled away from the smell of vomit.

Donald helped me get to the bathroom and clean up. I told him I would be ok, but I don't think he heard. He went back to take care of the puke. I stumbled around the house looking for Christine. She wasn't on the dance floor, or in the kitchen, or the backyard. I cried the whole way home, stepping over broken bottles and chipped cement. I puked again behind the dumpster of our apartment complex, which smelled worse than puke.

Christine wasn't at the apartment. She came home the next morning and found me asleep on the couch.

"So," she asked, "how was your night with Donald?" Her cadence didn't sound sober.

"Why did you leave me at the party?" I asked.

"There was a guy I've been trying to hook up with for months who finally invited me back to his place."

"But you gave me so many drinks, you knew I was drunk."

"You've been trashed at parties before. I thought you could handle yourself."

"Why did you leave me with Donald?"

"I just wanted y'all to have a good time," she said. "You've gotten so uptight, I just thought you needed to let loose a little bit. Donald really likes you." She poured herself a glass of water. "I'm sorry you can't handle your liquor anymore."

"You got me drunk, you should have been looking out for me," I said, "For all you know, Donald could have assaulted me."

"Did he?"

"I don't know," I paused, trying to remember all the details from the night before. I knew he had kissed me. I knew I threw up in his bed. "I don't think so."

"Then don't worry about it," she said, sipping her water. "I should have known you would freak out. You don't know how to have fun anymore."

Sometimes I think about Christine. I miss her energy and the part of her that wanted to know everything about me. The third drawer down in my dresser houses all my t-shirts. When I'm running low on clean clothes, I can see the frayed cutoffs that line the bottom of the drawer. I'm glad for the times we had together, but I'm not the same person I was when we became friends. I see Christine around campus every once in a while. She gives me this look like, "Whatever happened to us?"

I smile and shrug and know that she hasn't changed at all.

Dallas

All summer long we had two-a-days. Most of us would wake up at six for weight training, pump iron for three hours, eat a double-meat-double-cheese burger, sleep for four hours, and then head back in the afternoon for scrimmages. Often, someone would sleep through the second practice. Not Harrison though. After the scrimmage, we would line up in the end zone to run half-field sprints. Coach never gave us enough time to take off our pads and get to the line, so we discarded items as we ran—helmets, shoulder pads, hip pads—anything to make us lighter. We ran through the torn up turf like it was a mine field, scattered with our gear. Harrison never took his pads off. He lived for the sprints. Even in full gear, Harrison could easily come in a few yards ahead of the rest of us. Coach would yell at Harrison for not running like that during the season, but it didn't seem to bother him.

Harrison was the coolest guy on the team. He didn't give a fuck about football and we all knew it. Not that apathy makes you cool—a lot of us really cared about practice, weight training, watching film, etc—but Harrison made it seem cool. We never really understood him. We just heard stories from each other.

Forrest said that one time Harrison got head from Jennifer Bailey behind the field house. Most of us had never gotten head, much less even talked to Jennifer Bailey. She was tall and beautiful and in all AP classes. It happened in the front seat of Harrison's pickup. Jennifer met up with him after he parked—across from the field house double doors—right where one of the coaches or trainers could have walked out and caught him. He wouldn't care anyways. Then, when she was done, she opened the passenger door, got out, and walked back

across the campus to her own car (but not before spitting come all over Harrison's passenger seat). Harrison put an old paper Whataburger bag on top of the mess. Twenty minutes later, Brandon P hopped in his truck (sitting right on top of the come-soaked bag!) and sold Harrison an eighth, which they smoked half of together, right then, outside the field house.

Harrison always had dip at practice. We were impressed that he never got caught. He was constantly spitting on the sidelines. One time, Tyler M hit him so hard that the dip flung out of Harrison's mouth and got all over his face guard. He had to leave it like that for three more plays before he could go rinse it off at the water station.

Despite the dipping, Harrison was a pretty good player. Mostly, he was a fullback. Harrison could tuck and dive through the hole like no one else. Michael G missed three games last season because Harrison gave him a concussion during practice. Michael still jokes about feeling a little concussed every time after he takes a history test, but we think it did change him some.

Harrison used to play this game with different guys where they would punch each other in the arm—back and forth—until one of them gave up. We could see the gold and purple bruises on Harrison's left arm when he did bench press or power cleans. One time, Harrison was playing with Eddie R and neither one would give up. They kept punching each other, back and forth, back and forth. The hits echoed in the locker room, smacking like wet towels on cool concrete.

"Let's play for real," said Harrison, right before he hit Eddie in the face.

Eddie hit him back once, real fast, and then said "I give."

They both had black eyes for a week and a half. Teachers gave them looks in class, but nobody ever asked us about it.

Sometimes Harrison would fuck with the rest of us. He'd hit you when you weren't looking, or slam your locker just to get a reaction. Most of us learned to avoid eye contact and not freak out, but Joe C always made a big deal out of it. Joe got real pissed off at Harrison punching him in the arm, so Harrison started pulling his towel down and grabbing his ass. Joe hated that. He would come back at Harrison with jerks and punches, but Joe was half Harrison's size, so Harrison could just shove him up against the locker and say, "What?" Eventually, Joe started a rumor that Harrison was trying to turn him gay. On the sidelines at practice, Joe told us stories about how Harrison hit on him all the time.When Harrison heard the rumor, he found Joe in the locker room.

"Look everyone, he's trying to make me queer," said Joe.

"So what if I am?" said Harrison. He yanked Joe's towel off his waist and gave Joe a huge kiss on the lips. He even used tongue, we all saw it. Joe made a face like kid eating asparagus for the first time, then, before Joe could recover from the shock, Harrison punched him in the kidney and walked away laughing.

After that, we walked around with our towels taut around our waists, as if that could have stopped Harrison from grabbing any of us.

We all had the thought: good thing we weren't Joe. But we also thought, what if we were Joe, or if what we were next? There was something so alluring about Harrison. What would it be like if he pushed us up against a locker and tongued us? Probably bad, we thought. Joe didn't like it.

Eddie R said he went to a party with Harrison once. It was at Maddie Meikle's house. Harrison picked Eddie up in his huge truck, already sipping from a flask. When they got there, Harrison pulled a cold case of beer out of the bed of his truck.

"You and me," said Harrison. "We're going to finish this."

All night Harrison made Eddie match him, drink for drink. After five beers, Eddie started saying, "I'm good man," or, "Already got one," when Harrison would hand him another beer, but Harrison would crack it open and stuff it in his hand.

"Already opened this one," said Harrison, "so you might as well finish it."

When the party started to die down, Harrison tossed the cardboard container full of empty cans into the grass, already wet with dew. Eddie was having trouble walking, so Harrison shouldered him to the truck and set him in the truck bed.

"Just in case you yak," said Harrison.

Eddie bounced the whole way home in the bed of the truck. He said his stomach felt like it was trying to jump out onto the tailgate every time Harrison stopped at a light.

Harrison swerved in and out of lanes, ran through stop signs, and grazed a couple curbs, the whole time yelling, "We might not make it!" out his window. "It'll be a miracle if we get home!" he yelled to Eddie.

Harrison dropped Eddie off on his front lawn and drove off. Eddie threw up all over his favorite white sneakers.

The next day at school, Eddie was so hungover that he skipped the first two classes to puke in the bathroom. That afternoon at practice, Harrison gave Eddie a wink and said, "You party?"

Harrison smoked cigs every day between practice and afternoon classes. Chris L asked Harrison why he smoked, like, what the point was.

Harrison smiled like a dog about to kill a squirrel. "Just trying to die faster."

We thought that was a joke, but Chris didn't think so.

One time after practice Harrison cornered Saad A in the locker room. Saad thought for sure he was going to get kneed in the nads or something, but Harrison just wanted to know if other people thought he was a weird guy.

"I don't know," said Saad, backing up against his locker. "Yeah, I guess you're pretty weird."

"Ok," said Harrison, "thanks."

We all knew that Harrison went to a military academy before he moved here, but no one talked about it. Jason T heard that he got busted for drugs in eighth grade. It sure didn't change much, we thought.

Sometimes it seemed like Harrison was trying to get shipped back to the military. He probably would have if any rumors of his goings-on spread to his parents, or the school, or the police. Maybe one day he would show up to homeroom with a block of heroin and that would be that. It didn't seem impossible.

We lost the last game of our senior season, our sixth loss in a row. It was dark when we headed back to Highland Park. Coach cursed at the the refs, the other team, the 55 mph speed cap on the bus, and most other things. Our heads bounced against the rickety bus windows. Some of us listened to music and others slept with shoulder pads in our laps. It didn't feel great to lose, but most of us didn't care. The good ones would go on to play college ball. The rest of us would just go to college. Saad A and Joe C were automatic admit to Texas A&M. Eddie R got into UT with a scholarship. Jason T would probably go to Baylor like the rest of his family. Some were planning on going out of state: Chris L and Michael G to Georgia or Alabama; Tyler M to LSU.

Harrison sat alone in the back row. None of us had heard anything about where he was going to college, or if he applied to any schools at all. Maybe he would take his truck and drive around the country for a year, or forever. Maybe he would never leave high school. We could imaging him smoking weed outside the field house ten years from now, watching practice with a Whataburger cup full of dip spit.

When we got back to the locker room, coach gave us a speech about being lackadaisical and slacking off senior year. He called us clowns and shitheads, but it didn't bother us. We were already thinking about the spring, the summer, and college. When coach finished berating us, we put our pads back in our lockers and got dressed to go home. Harrison didn't change out of his uniform. He sat alone on a bench in the corner by the showers, still in his cleats.

Eddie R walked up to him. "Yo Harrison, you gonna change or what? We were gonna smoke and celebrate the end of high school football, if you're down."

Harrison looked up with red and bleary eyes. "No man, I think I'm just gonna hang out for a while."

Everyone saw his face. There were red lines, like he had been clawing the skin above his eyes. For the first time, none of us were scared of him. We thought about asking if he was ok, but nobody said a thing—figured it was better that way. This was just another losing season. Nothing wrong with that.

Beaumont

I never thought I'd end up at Olive Garden. In fifth grade I told Mrs. McGinnis that I wanted to be a model. I wrote a whole paper on it: "Why I Want to be a Model." She said that models come from California. Looking back, I guess she was right.

Mom always thought I would be a nun.

"You'd make a great nun," she said one morning on the drive to mass. "You know all the hymns and you love being nice to people."

I fiddled with the bow on the front of my dress, untying and retying it. "I think you can do those things and not be a nun."

For two years Mom told everyone that I wanted to join the church. The whole triangle thought that, if anyone, little Kathleen would surely grow up to be a nun.

Other girls had middle school boyfriends. They weren't real boyfriends. They didn't kiss or anything. The Catholic community was still looking for someone to nunnify. They ruled out Megan Dickey—she had long hair and a flirty laugh—and Charlotte Stokes and all the other girls with boyfriends, so it made sense that I would be the one to go to nun school or whatever.

I didn't go to nun school. In seventh grade, Brett Williams asked me to the movies with him and Megan Dickey and John Arnold. Megan and John had been going steady so I knew it was a big deal. They were holding hands before the film even started. I let Brett kiss me when the titles came up. He leaned in and asked for the popcorn and I put my face so close to him that he couldn't not kiss me. I didn't want to kiss him really. His breath smelled

like crawfish and he wasn't a nice boy, but sure enough, word spread around and no one talked about me being a nun anymore.

In high school I had nightmares about getting pregnant. In one of the recurring nightmares, my mimaw would chase me around with a can of beans.

"I know what you did!" she would yell.

Every time she yelled I would try to say that I didn't do anything, but it wouldn't come out over all the crying, so instead I would just run and run and run. Inevitably, Mimaw would throw the can of beans at me. Sometimes that killed me. Other times I would wake up holding a newborn baby with Mimaw standing over me. She would tell me that I was holding the devil's baby and then I would really wake up.

I told that dream to Megan. She said, "You know you can't get pregnant if you don't have sex, right?"

I knew, but it didn't keep me from having the dream. One time I told the dream to a priest in confession. He thought I was for sure lying about not having sex, so he gave me some Hail Marys to do and told my mom. She put me in this Jesus program that taught safe sex but not really. They told me the safest way to not get pregnant is to not have sex, which is true, but I was already doing that and still having the dreams, so I don't think it helped much.

At B lunch one day, Charlotte told me all about her first time. She had been seeing Hunter Porter for six months. They kept going further and further until finally they did it at Hunter's house in the upstairs bedroom on the floor on a t-shirt quilt.

"The best part was when he put it in," she said to the whole table between bites of leftover pizza.

I tapped my nails on the grey cafeteria table. I didn't know if you were allowed to look at someone when they talked about sex.

"You're going to like it so much," she said. "I already feel older."

"You guys have to be careful," said Megan. Her long hair danced beneath her shaking head. She looked at us like we were porcelain statues. "You have to be really careful."

Three months later we found out that Megan was pregnant. She had the baby and married John. Not middle school boyfriend John. John Prichard.

By the end of senior year, the only place I had gotten into school was Lamar. They didn't have programs for modeling or becoming a nun.

At our high school graduation everyone seemed to have it together. Charlotte and some of my other friends got into UT or A&M. Megan had a family now. I was going to get a business degree.

Mom said she thought one day I could help run the church—doing all their financial stuff—but I only lasted a year at Lamar, so here I am at Olive Garden. Sometimes I envy Megan. I wanted to be a model, but it seems like Megan got closer; she's always popping up in perfect photos on my newsfeed. Maybe she did it right: find a boy in high school and claim him for life. They still seem happy, coming in for date nights every couple weeks when Megan's parents can watch the baby. John calls me a saint each time I serve up bread sticks.

"Just doing the lord's work," I say. I refill their glasses. I show them the wine list. I give them three chocolate candies with the check and smile.

Corpus Christi

Jaime sat in his big recliner and watched cattle roping on the television. His fingers pinched salted pecans from a plastic tub. Jaime yawned and shifted in the chair. He wiped pecan salt onto the arm of the chair. Jaime's wife, Lorena, didn't want him to get the recliner because it took up nearly half of their living room, but he had worked over fifty years for the house they were living in and his back needed more than a normal chair could provide. The neighbor's pit bull was barking again, so he turned the TV up to cover up the sound. Outside, it was dark and humid. Lorena hunched over their small kitchen table, filling in a crossword by lamplight.

"Rick's going to need somewhere to park in the morning. You need to move the truck off the street," said Lorena.

Jaime sat and stared at the TV, bathed in its blue light.

"¡Oye! ¿Me escuchas?" said Lorena. "Apágalo."

"What?" said Jaime.

"Where is Rick going to park tomorrow?"

"He can park on the street. There's room."

Lorena shook her head. "If he shows up and there's no space you better move that truck."

In the morning, Jaime woke up early, as usual. He put on a white guayabera and khakis, slipped a black comb in his pocket, and looked out through the front door's screen.

There was no curb space. He grabbed his keys and drove the Chevy over the curb and onto the grass in front of the house.

"¡Mijo!" said Lorena when Rick showed up. "You park ok?"

Rick hugged his mother. "Yeah, just on the street."

"You just want to be careful where you park," said Lorena, "kids have been throwing rocks at cars on some of the cross streets."

"I thought you were bringing the kids?" said Jaime.

"I was, but Eddie had a trombone recital and Marta had some big birthday party, so Christy and I decided it would be easier if she kept them this weekend."

Lorena, Jaime, and Rick crammed around the corner table in the kitchen like shoes in a closet. They ate migas off of thin plastic plates. Rick told his parents about the slew of meetings he had planned for the next day. He explained how busy his work had gotten.

"When do I get to see my grandkids?" said Lorena. Her loose shirt sleeves dragged across the table as she reached for more salsa. "It's been too long."

After breakfast, Jaime drove the Chevy down to Moe's for a haircut. He loved the way nothing changed at Moe's: the smell of Barbasol and aftershave, fresh clippings on the floor, and the same handful of men conversing in vinyl chairs: Frank, Eduardo, Thomas, George, Lucio. Most of the regulars were retired refinery workers like Jaime. They told the same stories over and over again about this old boy who got drunk in his backyard, thought he was hunting, and shot the neighbors dog, or about that old boy who managed to fix his truck with an arc welder and some Coke cans. Jaime got a straight razor shave and thought about when Rick used to live in Corpus. Sometimes he wished Rick had never left, started his family here instead.

"You know," Jaime said to Martín, the barber, "my grandson Eddie has a trombone recital this weekend. I hear he's real good."

Martín dusted loose hair off the back of Jaime's neck with a horsehair brush.

That night, Lorena picked up Pete's Chicken-N-More. Jaime bit into a thigh. Fryer oil bubbled up from under the crispy skin like soap suds squeezed from a sponge.

"I forgot how good this is," said Rick.

"Pete's es el mejor," said Jaime.

"You know, we have chicken like this in San Antonio," said Rick, holding up a leg in one hand. He wiped his face with a napkin and looked towards his father.

Jaime took another thigh. "Not like Pete's."

"Actually, I've been thinking about it a lot," said Rick. He put down his chicken. "It could be good for y'all to move to San Antonio."

Jaime laughed. "¿Por qué? You have a problem driving down to see us?"

"I'm serious," said Rick. "You would get to see the kids more. Plus, San Antonio has better medical facilities—it's something to consider." Rick wiped his hands on the paper towel in his lap.

"It would be nice to see the kids," said Lorena.

"Yeah," said Rick, "and honestly, I could use an extra hand with them since Christy and I split up." Rick spooned cole slaw onto his plate. He kept his head lowered and his eyes on the food. "It would just be nice to be closer—not worry about something bad happening to you with me two hours away."

"Mira," said Jaime, "I worked my whole life for this house. We are not going to sell it and move to a hospital, just so we can die closer to you."

"I don't mean it like that," said Rick. He put down his plastic spoon and looked up at his father. "The bank has been doing really well lately, and I'm due for a promotion when we open the new branch. I know y'all don't have a ton of money lying around, but if it's about cost I can cover all the moving charges and even help pay for rent. You could be living in a much larger place, with a real kitchen table and a real living room."

"Why would we live in a bigger place when this one is paid for?" asked Jaime. "We don't need your money. We have a good house."

The next day, Jaime took the truck and cruised down Ocean Drive. He looked at the large houses with swaying palm trees in the front yard. They appeared freshly painted: pink and turquoise and yellow. He remembered when Rick brought the kids to Corpus six months before. Jaime took Eddie and Marta for a ride in the Chevy. They kept their heads pressed to the windows, marveling at the ocean and the smell of salt and the mewing gulls. They were headed to the Texas State Aquarium to see the sea otters when the power steering belt broke. Jaime had no control of the truck, so he coasted to the side of the road and parked on the seawall. Jaime pulled out the lunches they had packed. They sat on the rocks and fed pieces of tortilla to the gulls. Eventually, Rick came to pick them up in his Acura. "We went to the aquarium!" said Marta. Rick told her she had only seen the ocean and that they could go to the aquarium later, while Jaime fixed the truck.

Jaime drove until he reached Shoreline Drive and the marina. He breathed in the salty air and watched a shrimp trawler coming in to shore. White boats lined the marina docks like porcelain piglets. Jaime parked on the L-Head, near the bait house. When Rick was

little, Jaime would take him fishing here. They would get fresh bait and walk out along the bulkhead with cane poles. Once, Rick caught a flounder, but he was so scared by its eyes that he dropped his pole and let the fish carry it into the gulf. Jaime laughed so hard he couldn't even get mad at Rick for losing a nine-dollar fishing pole.

The bulkhead stretched around the marina like a stony arm, protecting the boats. Jaime walked out along the concrete that connected the brown and black boulders. He remembered each uneven rock and slippery patch of algae. Umber waves crashed against the bulkhead. The water rose up through holes between the rocks like tea filling a glass of ice. Jaime slicked back his hair with the black comb after a gust of ocean air. How long had it been since he had seen these rocks? How much had he forgotten about them?

Jaime got back in the Chevy and headed home.

"Where have you been all day?" asked Lorena. Her face was lit yellow by the tungsten kitchen lamp.

"Just around town," said Jaime.

"I've thought about what Rick said. I think he makes some sense." She looked at Jaime with soft eyes and pursed lips.

"So nobody cares about this house anymore?" Jaime said, taking off his shoes.

"Jaime, we all care about the house, but Rick has his own house now. He has his own family."

"Apparently we're not good enough anymore. We need to live like rich people so we can be part of his family."

Lorena gave up and went back to her puzzle. Jaime settled into his chair and grabbed a handful of pecans. He didn't turn on the television; instead, he listened to the scratching of

Lorena's pencil and the pit bull next door. The dog sounded like a refinery machine, rhythmically emitting harsh barks. Jaime looked around the small house. He remembered every repair job he had ever done: the toilet he installed, the extra electrical plugs he put in, the weather proofing he replaced every hurricane season, the shelves he built in the kitchen, the bathroom he retiled, the fence he erected when Rick was old enough to play in the yard, the steps he built when Lorena was tired of jumping up onto the back porch, the eaves he added to cover up his tools in the back yard.

"Rick will be home soon," said Lorena. "You need to move that truck."

Jaime started up the old Chevy. He looked out at the hood. Rust spots were starting to show through the reddish-orange paint like a rash. The steering wheel vibrated between his knees to the rhythm of the engine. He was going to pull up onto the lawn, but then he thought about how hard that must be on the truck. How every time he jumped the curb his suspension got worse and worse, and who knew how much longer this truck had left. He drove the Chevy around the block and parked on a side street. He let the engine run, listening to it purr. "Still sounds strong to me," he thought. Jaime turned on KSAB 99.9. His thumb was tapping along to the thrumming of the bajo sexto when he heard the crack. His left sideview mirror was shattered. Three kids on two bikes rode off in front of him.

"¡Cabrones!" Jaime yelled at the kids from the front seat. With his foot on the brake, he opened the truck door and saw a smooth, brown rock on the asphalt. It was the size of a fist and looked like it came straight from the bulkhead. Jaime imagined himself getting out of the truck and hurling the rock back at the kids. He imagined hitting one of them in the head and watching the two bikes crash into each other.

Jaime started to get out of the truck, but as soon as his left foot touched the ground he felt the truck ripping out from under him. The Chevy knocked him to the ground and then idled into the black SUV parked in front of it. Jaime could hear the crack of his headlights breaking against the bumper of the SUV and its bleating car alarm. The kids stopped their bike and turned around to see the old man lying in the street. "Oh shit," on of them said seriously before they all burst out laughing and rode off.

A neighbor came out onto his front porch to see what had happened. He ran to turn off Jaime's truck.

Jaime's white shirt was spotted with blood and streaks of black asphalt. His back ached terribly and his whole body was sore. He felt like he just lost a boxing match. The neighbor helped him to his feet. Jaime looked down at the scrapes on his left arm, still unsure of what happened.

When Rick came home, Lorena had already bandaged Jaime and propped him up in his recliner. Jaime had gauze taped to his arm and sticking out from underneath his undershirt. Lorena repeated the whole story to Rick, who promised to pay for all the damages. Jaime sat in his recliner and listen to Rick and Lorena talking in the kitchen. He overheard Rick saying that the needed to sell the truck, that it wasn't safe for Jaime to keep driving.

Rick got a chair from the kitchen and sat next to the recliner. He watched bull riding with Jaime all afternoon. They took turns pinching pecans until the whole tub was empty.

Lorena made chicken mole enchiladas for dinner. The three of them ate in front of the muted, flashing TV. Everyone got seconds.

"I really think you'll like San Antonio," said Rick, looking towards his father.

Jaime didn't respond. He stared into the screen and thought about the faucet that still leaked, the one loose floorboard, the worn weatherstripping, the toilet that ran if you didn't pull up the handle, the peeling paint on the kitchen cabinets, the ripped front door screen, and the rotting fence in the back yard. He listened to the pit bull next door and knew it was the only thing he wouldn't miss.

Bandera

It all started when Jim McAvey fired me from Super S. He said I couldn't work there anymore on account of being late too much, taking long smoke breaks, and the one time I yelled at the out-of-town lady for complaining about our produce. I told Jim that those were all good reasons to fire someone except that I wasn't always late—I was just bad with time cards—and I had to take longer breaks cause I smoke real Marlboros and all the other employees smoke shorts. I did yell at the out-of-town lady, but to be fair, she got in a huge hissy fit over lettuce. She said there was something wrong with our lettuce and I proved her wrong by eating half a head right there in front of her. Then I told her to go buy her lettuce somewhere else if she could find anything closer than Kerrville or San Antonio.

"That's all good and well," said Jim, "but I still have to let you go, Evelyn."

Jim wasn't always an asshole, but that didn't matter because I was out of a job all the same, so I spent the next two weeks looking for work. Bill told me there wasn't any work to be found tubing on the river and drinking at the Chikin Coop, but I told Bill he should shut his mouth and give me a break if he wanted to stay together. Bill ain't my husband. I was married three times and I will never get married again in my life. Bill is going to be my boyfriend until I die or get tired of having him around.

"I didn't mean any trouble," said Bill. His thumb pushed a dent into his Lone Star can. He sat across the table from me. "I just wished you were having a little more luck finding a job."

I told Bill that a job would come when it wanted to so there was no use rushing it. I ate the rest of the chicken Bill had bought and cleaned up the dinner trash all by myself.

Sure enough, I was right. The next day I ran into Carol Pence on 16. She was selling pecans out the back of her pickup. I told her I was out of work and we both talked about how nice Jim McAvey was before he got promoted to store manager. Carol gave me a small bag of pecans for free—she wasn't selling many anyways—and told me that a woman with a rental house just outside of town was looking for a cleaner. She said the woman was desperate for help, no cleaning experience needed. She gave me a name and a phone number I could call.

"That's great!" Bill said. We sat in the blue lawn chairs outside our trailer. He scratched the hair coming out of the top of his shirt. "When are you going to call?"

"Well," I said, "I'm going fishing tomorrow, so maybe next week."

Bill got real mad and yelled at me for sitting around all day while he was out mending fences in the hot sun. He said that it wasn't my fault for not having a job unless I made it my fault by not trying. Bill doesn't get too upset usually so when he does I take it real serious. I told him I could probably find time to call the next day before I went fishing, and I did.

"Hello," I said, thumbing ash off my Marlboro with my free hand. "This is Evelyn Williams. I'm calling about the cleaning job."

"Yes!" said the woman on the other end. Her voice had a squeak to it, like a gate that you open too fast and you're through before you see what's on the other side. "Carol Pence told me you might call. She recommended you well, but honestly at this point I'd hire anyone. I've been dying without a house cleaner! When can you start?"

"Well," I said, "I'm going fishing today…"

"So tomorrow?" interrupted the woman. She sounded like a TV show lawyer, like there was a more important conversation to be had in five minutes with somebody else.

"Well," I said, "next week would actually be better."

"I can pay double if you start tomorrow. I've got a family and friends coming up in two days and I really need the house cleaned."

"Ok," I said, "I suppose I can do tomorrow."

She said that was great and told me that her name was Wendy. She gave me all the details about where the house was, how to get get the house and gate keys out of the lockbox, and how we could meet up for payment after I cleaned it.

I got off the phone and went fishing down by Peaceful Valley road. It's awfully hard to fish when you know you won't be fishing the next day. There is too much pressure to catch something. After two hours and no nibbles, I gave up and put my rod down. I sat on a stump and ate an egg salad sandwich while a group of tubers put in. The teal water rippled in and out of shadow.

"Nothing like a shady spot and a cold beer after a hard weeks work," said one of the tubers as he slipped into the water. His red skin was streaked with sunscreen.

"You sure are right," I said between bites of egg salad. "It's too bad I don't have a beer to enjoy in this shady spot."

The tuber tossed me a Coors before pushing off a log and floating into the current. I cracked it open. The beer brought out the bite of the pickle in the egg salad.

"Take it easy!" he yelled as he drifted away.

The next day I drove to Wendy's place. It was a single story house built on the back half of a sloping lot. It had clapboard siding and a tin roof. I didn't have any of my own

cleaning supplies, but Wendy said that was fine because they had everything I needed already at the house. When I got there, first thing I did was walk around back and look over their deck. They had a nice view of the river and some rickety old steps leading down to it. The deck had a hot tub built into it that was covered up with blue canvas. It looked nice, but not new.

I found all the cleaning supplies in a white cabinet in the laundry room. Wendy gave me a list of stuff to do — wash the linens, sweep, mop, vacuum, wipe down the counters, and some other stuff — but I swear that it was all done when I got there. The floor was clean and there wasn't any dirt or mud in the whole house. The counters looked nice and shiny. I wiped them down with a paper towel, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The bathroom smelled like lemon. I stripped the beds and tossed the linens in the wash, just in case, and then went outside for a smoke. I thought that this was the easiest money I had ever made.

It only took two loads to do all the sheets and pillowcases in the whole house. While they were drying I went back outside for a second smoke and saw an armadillo in the backyard. Soon as it saw me, it scurried under the deck. That armadillo explained all the holes in the backyard. Aside from those holes, the yard was perfect. They had grass that won't naturally grow here and big mounds of mulch with tons of bright wildflowers.

I finished up the laundry and walked around the house again, but I couldn't find anything else to do, so I tried to make up the beds real nice like they had them before, with the sheets creased under the pillows and the bedskirt even on all sides. Then I locked up and left.

I told Bill when I got home about the whole thing. He laughed real hard and said that I was still pretty much not working, only now I was getting paid to do it.

Four days later, Wendy's family and friends had all left the house. I was supposed to meet her to get paid, so I drove back there. She was waiting for me outside the front door wearing a floral blouse, black pants, and black wedges. Her hair was pulled up tight behind her head and large sunglasses covered her eyes.

"Hello Evelyn," she said.

"Howdy," I said.

There was a green stack of twenty dollar bills in her hand. "Thank you for coming to clean," she said, starting to fidget a little bit, twisting the money around in her hand like she wasn't sure if she was going to give it to me. "You did come to clean, right?"

"Well, yes," I said. "There wasn't a whole lot that needed cleaning though, so I mostly just changed the sheets."

Wendy got this shocked look on her face. "There wasn't a lot that needed cleaning?" She slipped the money back into her pocket. "Let me show you something."

We walked through the house to the bathroom. Wendy held up the toilet seat.

"Do you see anything?" she asked.

"No, it looks fine to me."

"That's because I cleaned," she said, "When we got here there was piss on the rim of the toilet seat. That's piss that my guests had to look at because it didn't get cleaned."

We moved over to the shower and Wendy pulled back the curtain.

"And what's this here? See that? That's pink mold growing on the grout. Come with me."

Wendy took me around the house and showed me the dirt underneath the couches, the dust on the floorboards, the coffee stains underneath the coffeepot, the grease spots on the back of the stove, and the dirt in the corner of the living room. She even showed me how she could tell I didn't mop because of how dull the floor was.

"I don't have time to clean the whole house when I come up here. That's why I have you. That's your job." Wendy tapped her nails on the countertop. "One last thing," she said, and we walked to the laundry room. "Evelyn, what are these?" Wendy unrolled a paper towel with two cigarette butts in it.

I told her they were cigarette butts.

"What were they doing on my granite patio?"

"I was taking a break," I said.

Wendy crossed her arms and wrinkled her floral blouse. "I don't want you smoking while you're here." She paused to let her cherry red lips squeeze together. "I don't want cigarette butts on the ground and I don't want you covered in that smell while you're inside my house."

I said I was sorry about the cigarettes and I didn't know about all that other stuff I was supposed to do. I told her that this was my first house cleaning job and I would try to do better next time. Wendy pulled the money back out of her pocket.

"I'm going to pay you because I told you I would," she said, "but if this ever happens again, you're not getting paid."

I took the money without counting it and she asked me to clean the house again in the next two days, before some renters showed up. I told her I could do that and I would be

sure to clean all the things she mentioned. I also told her about the armadillo living under her deck and she got a look like I was telling a nasty rumor I heard about her family.

"That's the reason my backyard has been torn up?" asked Wendy.

"Yup," I said, "that critter probably comes out every night to eat the grubs and worms living in your grass."

"Well," said Wendy, shaking her head, "that's just horrible. I'll have to get someone out here to take care of that, but you please just worry about the house. I need the house clean."

That night I told Bill all about Wendy telling me off for not cleaning her way.

"She may be a mean little lady," said Bill, easing the kinks out of my shoulders, "but she sure does pay well."

Bill was right. Wendy paid like a fool. In one day cleaning her house I could make as much as I would have in an entire week working part-time at Super S. So, the next day I went back to her house. I wiped up all the pee on the rim of the toilet. I scrubbed and bleached the tile in the shower. I got down on my knees and dusted all the baseboards. I swept the dirt out from the corners of the living room, vacuumed underneath the couches, and mopped the floors until they shined. I sponged all the grease off of the stove and wiped down all the counters, even underneath the coffee pot. I was there for six hours and I only took a break to smoke once. I took extra care to check and make sure I didn't smell afterwards and I hid the butt in an armadillo hole in the backyard. When I was done, the whole house shined like high beams hitting a street sign.

Bill didn't believe me when I told him how well I cleaned every inch of that house, so that night I took him by to see my handiwork.

"Holy shit," said Bill. He looked at the glistening white countertops and the shining black appliances. "Can you clean a trailer like this?"

"I can if you pay me like Wendy does," I said.

I walked Bill around the house. We looked at all the odd nicknacks and family portraits that filled every spare shelf and tabletop. I showed him the wildflowers in the backyard and the hole I hid my cigarette in.

"Is that thing filled?," said Bill, looking at the hot-tub. He smiled real big.

We unclipped and rolled back the canvas cover. The hot-tub was filled to the brim with clear water and the moon's reflection. Bill said we should turn it on and have a little celebration on account of my paycheck. I really did tell him I thought it was a bad idea at first, but Bill reminded me how much work I had done and how we weren't hurting anybody. Plus, nobody was supposed to be in the house for two more days, so it's not like we would have gotten caught. The more I thought about it, I had earned some kind of celebration, so we decided to take a little dip.

Bill figured out how to get the hot-tub heated up with bubbles and all. I went back to the house to grab some tealight candles from the cleaning supply closet and two leftover beers from the fridge. We set the little candles in the hot-tub cupholders, stripped down, and slipped into the water. It didn't take too long sipping Modelo and relaxing under the moonlight before things got real romantic in the hot-tub. I really did tell Bill that it was a bad idea, but he said that this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity, and he was right.

Three days later I got a call from Wendy. She said that the renters showed up and were very impressed with how clean the house was, but they tried to turn the hot-tub on and none

of the jets were working. The next day, Wendy drove out to the house to see what the problem was.

"I couldn't believe it," she said in a higher pitch than usual. "There was melted wax in all the cupholders. Some trailer park people from up the road probably broke in and boinked in my hot-tub!"

I tried not to laugh when Wendy's voice squeaked on "boinked" and I told her she was probably right about the trailer park people, but I just called them her neighbors.

"I have to ask," said Wendy, more solemnly. "Did you lock the gate and house when you left?"

I told her I couldn't be sure and that I was awfully tired after cleaning her house for ten hours straight.

"Well," she said. "The plumber came out this morning to take a look at the Jacuzzi. He said that a bunch of hair and wax and God knows what else got into the jets and clogged up the motor. I feel bad about doing this, but I'm going to have to take the repair costs out of your next paycheck, seeing as your neglect allowed this to happen."

I wan't real happy about that, but it seemed better than telling her I jammed up the hot-tub myself. We arranged that I would clean the house sometime in the next two weeks, before her family came up again. I figured that it would be worth it to keep working for Wendy because the pay was so good compared to anything else in town, but if I wasn't going to get paid for the next job it didn't make sense to clean it like I did the first time.

"You can't do that," said Bill, flicking cigarette ash into a empty can. Bill sat in one of the blue chairs while I paced around. "That woman'll fire you for sure. And, if she doesn't fire you, she'll just take more out of your next paycheck for not doing a good job this time."

I told Bill that the whole thing was his fault anyway so he should just clean the house himself, but we both knew that was ridiculous. Bill couldn't clean a window well enough to tell if it was day or night.

"In fact," said Bill, licking his lips, "I bet if you clean the place real nice again, she may even reconsider docking your pay at all. It could be worth it to do a little extra, maybe leave her a gift or something."

The next day, I went fishing, but I couldn't stop thinking about that house and what I could do to make things up to Wendy. I felt so bad for messing up the hot-tub and I felt bad imagining what Wendy must think of me, some incompetent house cleaner. Also, I wasn't catching any fish. So, I packed up my stuff and drove to Wendy's house. I cleaned the whole place—just as well as the first time, if not better—in only four hours. I didn't smoke at all. When I was done, I put back the cleaning supplies and locked up the house. I drove first to the Beverage Barn. They were having a special on Lone Star, which was already their cheapest beer, so I bought two cases: one for us and one for Wendy. Then I drove down to Ranger Crossing. There were a couple families out barbecuing and some kids swinging into the river on long ropes. Ben Bragg was propped up against a jumble of tree roots with a fishing pole.

"Howdy Evelyn," said Ben with a silver dollar smile. He had an odd way of craning his neck around to see me without moving his rod in the water. "How's life?"

I told Ben about cleaning Wendy's house and how I didn't have time to fish anymore so I'd like to buy some of his.

"I got three catfish I can sell you," he said, pointing to a white bucket. "But that's about it."

I said that was perfect and paid him in cash. The bucket sloshed with water and fish as I walked back to the truck. I drove to Wendy's house right away. When I got there, I killed and cleaned the catfish on my truck bed. I took the fillets inside and wrapped them in wax paper. I found a pen and wrote "from Evelyn" on the wax paper; I had to write it over and over again until it was legible. Making sure not to get fish drippings on the floor, I put the fillets in the freezer and a case of Lone Star in the fridge. If that's not a good enough "I'm Sorry" then I don't know what is.

"You did a smart thing," said Bill, opening up out case of Lone Star. "I bet she pays you extra this time."

I sure hoped Bill was right. For two weeks I fished and ate pecans and waited to hear back from Wendy. Finally, she called.

"The house was cleaned very well," said Wendy.

"Did you like the fish I left you?"

"About that," said Wendy. Her tongue clicked like a screen door snapping shut. "Evelyn, why did you leave fish in our freezer?"

I told her I just wanted to do something nice for her. I said that I've eaten a bunch of Ben's fish over the years and they are some of the tastiest Guadalupe catfish I've ever had.

"That's a nice gesture, I suppose," she said, "but maybe we should have a no gifts policy from here on out. It's just that I would rather personally choose the food my family eats. So I know where it comes from. You know?" She told me she threw out the fish and I could pick up the beer next time I was there because they probably wouldn't drink it. Then she told me that the hot-tub expenses were more than expected and she couldn't pay me at all for the last cleaning job, which I thought was just bullshit.

"It may be bullshit," said Bill, sitting next to me on the couch beneath our bed. He slid his hand onto my jeans, "but you're not really in a place to argue with her."

"She just threw away the fish!" I said. "There is no pleasing this woman. She doesn't appreciate a damn thing I do."

I had half a mind to drive out to her place and burn the whole house down. What I would have given to see her family photos up in flames, knowing that I would never have to clean that place again.

"Evelyn," said Bill, taking his hand back, "I love you, but I think you're taking the wrong approach here. You did something nice for this woman and it didn't turn out so well, but you can't just let everything go to shit because things didn't work out in your favor. I think you really need to ask yourself if you want this job or not and what you would do to keep it. People respond to nice gestures. You just got unlucky this time."

Well, I wasn't a big fan of that at first. I walked around outside and had a beer and a few smokes and thought about how mean Wendy had been to me. I thought of all the ways I could get back at her. When I got bored of that, I realized that she hadn't really done anything to me that I didn't deserve and once again, Bill was right. I knew I needed to try and make things up to her if I wanted things to be right between me and Wendy. I wanted to prove to Wendy that I was more than competent, and I had an idea of something I could do.

I went back inside to get Bill's .45 and some hollow-points from our closet. I drove straight to Wendy's house. Might as well fix things right away. It was dark out and the sky was filled with blue stars. I took the pistol and the bullets and a flashlight from the truck and walked around to the backyard. I tripped on one of the holes and almost broke my ankle. Cursing something mean, I limped over to the patio. Wendy had this huge outdoor table

made of wrought iron and glass, with ten mesh chairs surrounding it. I dragged a chair to the edge of the patio. Its metal corners loudly scraped across the granite. I oriented myself towards the deck and sat down. Everything was quiet. I could hear the smooth hiss of the river below and the wind tickling the juniper trees. In darkness, I loaded the entire magazine full of hollow points and slid it back into the gun. Then I waited. I sat on the edge of my seat for two hours. The whole backyard became a mixture of nighttime smells. Wendy's mountain laurel smelled like grape Kool-Aid. The scent of dew and warm earth rose up from the ground. I could smell lemon mint from the garden, mixed with warm mulch. This might have been enough to make some people hungry, or put other people to sleep, but I just sat there and waited. I was filled with the kind of pride that accomplishes things.

Finally, I heard a sound—a rustle—from beneath the deck. I made sure the safety was off on Bill's pistol and got the flashlight ready with my free hand. I muttered something to the effect of, "come here you scaly-backed son-of-a-bitch." Then I heard another rustle, like the wind was blowing leaves but just in one place. I aimed the flashlight at the sound and flicked on. Sure enough, it was the armadillo, crawling out from under the deck to look for grubs. I didn't wait for it to curl up or scurry back under the deck. I wanted to put a hole in that armadillo for each hole in the yard, and I pulled the trigger again and again, firing all eight rounds. I clicked it a ninth time just for good measure. I heard the sound of fluid gurgling in the distance. I aimed the flashlight at the ground and beneath the deck, but I didn't see any armadillo, dead or alive. Then I heard the pissing. I walked over to the deck and saw three small streams of water coming out from the hot-tub. I unclipped the canvas cover. Inside, I could see three star shaped holes in the acrylic where the water was pouring out and three expanded bullets resting on the blue bottom of the hot-tub.

I started to think of how I could plug up the holes with epoxy or resin and repaint it so Wendy never knew the difference. I got into the hot-tub, clothes and all, to get the three bullets out. Right when I was about to throw them over the bluff, a big voice yelled, "Freeze! Don't move!"

I turned around and saw Officer Mark Novak with his gun pulled out. It surprised me so much that I did freeze, right there, with cool water seeping up my blue jeans and dripping from my arms back into Wendy's soon-to-be-empty hot tub.

It turns out that Wendy got real suspicious after the whole hair and candles incident. She told both her neighbors about it. She said that they should call the police if they saw anyone on her property at night and report it as suspicious activity. Well, I fit that description pretty well apparently, so one of those goody-goody neighbors called Officer Novak when they saw my truck in the front yard.

Novak put me in handcuffs and told me that I had trespassed, damaged private property, and fired a gun on a piece of land under ten acres, which is illegal. I tried to explain about the armadillo, but he wasn't convinced, seeing as there was no armadillo around.

Bill came to see me the next day here at the Bandera County Jail. He told me that Wendy had called Carol Pence, real upset at her recommendation. Carol gave her Bill's number which she called to fire me via Bill. After all I tried to do for her and how hard I worked to please that woman, I was pretty disappointed.

"Bill," I said, "you tell that woman that I'm the best damn cleaning lady in this whole county. She's going to have to go to Kerrville or San Antonio to find someone that can do the job half as well as me."

Bill said that he had no interest in hearing Wendy's mouse voice ever again, and if I cared so much I should call her myself when I get out.

"I'm not going to call her," I said. "She can just find out all on her own. I bet she has to wait six months before she even gets a lead. I hope that house fills up with dust and dirt, and the shower gets covered in pink mold, and the kitchen counter turns a stained brown, and that damn armadillo digs up every last one of her flowers."

Bill says I should go talk to Jim McAvey about getting my job back at Super S, but I know I'm too good for that. Soon as I get out of here I'm going to get back to fishing and wait for another cleaning job to get kicked up to me. I'll find somebody that really appreciates me, someone that wants tile floors to shine like glass, a toilet bowl you could eat chili out of, and windows as clear as the Guadalupe river. I know I'm the best cleaner in this town and I don't need Wendy to tell it to me.

Marfa

If you can afford it, you're going to want to stay on the main drag, ideally in the Paisano. It's historic and beautifully retrofitted and right in the heart of the town. Brian and I stayed in Alpine, thirty miles away, at a cheap motel.

The first night you're there, go see the Marfa lights. Driving west towards town, you'll see an adobe structure on the left side of the road. It's a circular building on a flat pavilion, and it resembles a small museum or information center. It's a bathroom. Behind the bathroom is a viewing deck, from which the Marfa lights are visible. I stood on that deck with Brian, overlooking the expansive plains and stared out into the night sky for over an hour. It was beautiful, with more stars than you could imagine, but no Marfa lights. We asked the only family there if they could see the lights.

"Oh yeah," said a dad or uncle. "It's those two green ones and a that red flashy one." He pointed out at three distinct dots on the horizon, clearly manmade beacons for helicopters or other nighttime aircraft.

"I don't know," said a mother or aunt. "That red one is flashing too rhythmically I think."

We waited a while longer, but all we saw was a man walking his dog beneath the viewing deck.

You're going to want to get up early and go to Marfa Burrito in the morning. They serve burritos longer than the plate for only five dollars. You have to order in Spanish, but you

could probably get by pointing at things and talking slowly if you have to. I ordered *un burrito con huevos y chorizo, un café, y un Topo Chico*. The best part is, the coffee is free.

A thing you should know about West Texas: it's incredibly windy. You'll see a lot of people smoking cigarettes. I think you have to smoke twice as many cigarettes for the same buzz because the wind is constantly begging at the ember, burning an idle cigarette much faster than where we are from. As a refuge from the wind and the smoke, you're going to want to eat inside.

After breakfast, it's a good idea to drive out to Prada Marfa. It's not any different from the photographs you can find online, and the irony could easily be appreciated without actually visiting the site, but it's worth the half hour drive out of town.

A warning: Presidio county police will pull you over for going eighty in a seventy-five, so take it slow and enjoy the endless expanse of dry ground and tumbleweeds. Even if you get pulled over, don't worry. They won't give you a ticket. They just want to walk around your car four to five times and see what's in the trunk.

Once you have a photo at Prada Marfa, you should head to the Chinati Foundation and check out some of Donald Judd's art. The concrete works are free, but it's worth it to spend a little money and see the milled aluminium boxes. The fifteen works of concrete are in the middle of a huge field. They will tell you not to walk on the concrete, but what's the hurt if you're the only ones that do it? The milled aluminium boxes are marvelous. They are in a giant industrial structure that echoes every time you squeak a shoe or make a comment about how half the boxes look the same. This is a great chance to have a spiritual experience.

You'll be hungry after walking around so much. I would recommend grabbing a bit to eat at Food Shark. They have great Falafel, just like you can find in Austin or Houston. One

cool thing about Food Shark is that they usually give you a half dollar coin when you get your change. Make sure to get extra napkins, some are bound to blow away in the wind.

After lunch, have a walk around the town. Practically everywhere sells something. You can even get a t-shirt from the local radio station. Wherever you end up buying something, use the half dollar. This way, the cashier will know you went to Food Shark and you'll have something to talk about.

We walked through almost all of the town. There were two art galleries open with no one in them. You could go through and be entirely alone with various minimalist works, marvelling at the angles and shadows.

In the evening, you may want to try out one of the midcentury modern bars or restaurants in town. There is beautiful decor and artful cuisine. Brian and I went to Misery on our one night there, which unfortunately, you won't be able to do. It was a one night reopening of the bar. I talked to one of the previous managers, and she said that it wasn't profitable to keep the place running year round. The booze was free and there were three great bands. One psych-western band from the panhandle, and two local groups. One of the local bands played some pretty heavy punk. The whole room two-stepped to a song with the chorus "Have you ever been with a dude?" Everyone at the bar had a beard and boots. This one guy's friends kept yelling at him because he wiped barbecue sauce on their Denim.

"What the fuck Trevor?" They laughed.

Trevor had this party trick that was pretty much just spitting beer as far as he could across the dance floor. Trevor's mouth-beer sprayed above the crowd, landing on people shoulders and soaking into the sawdust on the dance floor. We danced until we were sweated through and then talked to one of the guitarists after the show.

"Gotta do Marfa Burrito," he said. "So good."

We met a guy named Nick who came out to Marfa to visit a friend and mentally heal after his uncle's death. Nick was driving a little tipsy one night and his truck ran off the road. It rolled eight times. He said since then he's just been trying to survive in the desert, working at the coffee shop, making music on the side. Nick had a one-hitter he shared with one of the band's drummers.

Trevor walked by with a wad of cash in his hand.

"Two hundred bucks! Let's get some coke!"

His circle of friends cheered. He came back later with a couple cases of beer.

Nick got into an argument with another guy about the cops in Marfa. Nick thought they were raiding bars, searching for something. The other guy just kept saying, "No man, police are good," as he sipped Modelo.

Brian found the weatherman for the local NPR station by the fireplace outside. He said a cold front was coming the next day. Every time somebody mentioned how good the fire felt he stared into it like a neanderthal who knows his death is near.

An older couple climbed through a gap in the fence at the back of the bar. They were wearing matching leopard print suits and looked like this was their third party of the night. A small entourage of drunk people followed them through the fence gap.

Around one in the morning, the police pulled up outside the bar. The doorman told us not to worry. He said they were just pulling someone over for a broken tail light. He also told me about the modernist anti-hero nonlinear anti-love novel he was working on, rubbing his chin as he talked.

Trevor saw the police lights and threw a chair over the fence of the bar.

"Fuck police!" he yelled over the fence, and then walked back to his friends. Their laughter encouraged him so much that he threw another chair over the fence.

Three police officers walked into the bar.

"Who threw the chairs?" said the leading one, the sheriff.

Trevor didn't even notice they had walked in. "Did you see me throw that chair?" he said to his friends.

"Who threw the chair? Right now." said the sheriff, like a high school principal.

Trevor raised his hand. "I did!" he said, beer dripping down his chin.

After a half-hour of talks with Trevor and the bar manager and the sheriff, they took Trevor to jail for the night for destruction of property.

"Be careful when you drive out of here," Nick told us. "They'll be waiting."

Everyone said goodbye to the sheriff as he left. One woman asked if they were still on for lunch the next day.

At two in the morning, the bar closed up and everyone drove home drunk.

There is not a ton to do in Marfa, so you might as well wake up and go to Marfa Burrito again. Maybe you'll see someone from the night before there, or at Food Shark, or the radio station, or any of the other shops in town.

When you're done with your trip, make sure to tell everyone about it. Give your unique recommendations for things to do in Marfa and encourage other Texans to visit. After all, that's what makes Marfa, Marfa.

Plainview

Leaves fall every Fall. Henry rides his motorbike around town in jeans and a t-shirt. He flirts with even the ugly girls.

What a nice boy, says Mom, a staple of the town.

Henry smokes pot behind the post office.

His tennis shoes squeak on the grocery store tile.

He scratches behind his right ear when he smiles.

Sundays after church, the girls sit around blue Formica tables. They eat lunch and wonder if Henry will ever settle down. They share bundt cake for dessert.

Henry tosses half a sandwich to the birds. He doesn't know what kind of birds they are, but he likes them just the same.

Sometimes, Henry will take a girl to the movies — they may even get a kiss — but it doesn't mean anything. The girls know this.

Henry does this or that to get by. He'll mend fences, or lay bricks, or fix your car if you buy him dinner.

Better get Henry, says Mom. Gutters are clogged again. Lawnmower won't start. Woodwork needs a touchup.

He always works with a smile.

What a nice boy, says Mom. Sure would be nice to keep you around here Henry!

Henry nods, scratches behind his ear.

I've seen him behind the post office. He laughs at nothing. It's a sweet laugh.

He'll never settle down, says one of the Girls, not for one of us anyway.

The sugar glaze melts under my hot breath.

Henry rakes leaves in the front yard.

There are never enough leaves, Mom says.

Once, Henry took me to see a grain silo outside of town. We didn't talk much, just watched the chaff-less grain tumble off conveyor belts and into the silo. It rolled over and sunk into itself. I held him tight on the motorbike.

At the Nu-Griddle Cafe, we ate chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and canned green beans. Henry put a quarter in the table-side jukebox. I told Henry I loved him. I told him that I should be the one he settles down with. I said I wouldn't make him go to church or stop smoking pot, and we could spend all day driving around on his bike. I told him how my family had enough money to pay for his living anyway, so we might as well just call it a dowry and he would never have to work again in his life.

He smiled and scratched his ear. He said he couldn't marry me because he knew he was going to die. He figured it was only another year or two before his motorcycle rolls off the road outside of town and he ends up face down in a gulley. He said he couldn't commit to having kids or building a house or nothing because he wouldn't be around to see it through.

It's been two years now and he's still around. The girls talk about him after church and I still see him most Saturdays at the grocery store.

Every fall that boy rakes up all our leaves, says Mom. Maybe if we keep the bags and toss the dead leaves back out into the yard, we could keep him around all Winter.

I tell her that's a dumb thing to say and I don't want to hear any more about Henry or the leaves or anything really.

Houston

Edmond Strauss was in the neighborhood before any of us. His kids had kids by the time we came along. The Strauss house sat in the middle of Peckelmore Lane. It was the only one story house on the block, with big hedges hiding its facade from the street so it looked like a floating roof. On one side of it was our house, a two-story 1970s remodel. After the Strauss house, we had the second smallest home on the block. Most of the others were recently built McMansions with ten types of windows, unnatural columns, mismatched roofs, a useless third-story spire. On the other side of the Strauss house was an empty lot, vacant because no one wanted to have their third-story spire looking down into the rusted heap that was Mr. Strauss's backyard: his brambles, his crooked trees, his rusted trampoline, his parked station wagon, his tools strewn about. He kept three German Shepherds to protect his rusty car from rusty car thieves.

When I was in second grade, one of the German Shepherds died. Charlie. The white one. He was scared by a thunderstorm, got tangled up in his chain, and choked himself to death. I had never known anything that died before that. I used to see Charlie at the fence every day when I got off the bus, but then he was gone. Mom joked that he committed suicide because he was tired of living in Edmond's backyard. Dad said Edmond had already found a new white German Shepherd to replace Charlie. Mr. Strauss said that his new dog would be tougher than Charlie and do a better job keeping his house safe. I liked Charlie because he was the only one of the three dogs that didn't bark at me. Charlie's death taught

me three things: different people like different dogs, anything is replaceable, and dead things really are gone forever.

Mr. Strauss was always trying to teach me lessons.

"Now Toby," he would say, stopping me on the driveway, "you should pick up the paper while you're on your way into the house. That'd make your mother real happy. A happy mother makes a happy family. You know what they say, if mama ain't happy…" He cut himself off with his own chuckles.

"Now Toby," he would say, sneaking up behind me as I took out the trash, "are you still seeing that same girl?"

"Yessir, I am."

"Can you cook?"

"I make eggs, pancakes, burgers, most things."

"What about your little girlfriend, can she cook?"

"We made pizza together one time."

"Now Toby, I'm gonna tell you what my dad told me. If that girl can shake a spoon, you keep her around. You see, I can't cook a lick, but Mrs. Strauss can fry an egg faster than I can find the damn spatula. That's good that your girlfriend can whip up a meal. You keep her around as long as you can. Then you'll end up old and happy with a potbelly like me!" His laughter shook his belly as he slapped it with a greasy hand.

"Now Toby, when are you gonna get that long hair cut short again?"

"I'm not sure Mr. Strauss, just growing it out for now."

He laughed. "That's real good. Grow it while you have it. Look at me. My hair is too tired to grow out like that anymore. Not that I ever had it that long. I've had this haircut since I was eighteen years old. Back when I was off playing soldier they only allowed one haircut—short!" He laughed as he rubbed his flattop. "You know how much a haircut like mine costs?" He paused, and then his eyes widened and his cheeks bulbed up. "It's free! I've cut this myself since 1956!"

When I was in middle school Mr. Strauss would come over and stand in the garage while my dad cut my hair. I would sit on a foldout camping stool with my eyes closed, listening to their conversation and the hum of the clippers. The cooling night air would settle on my bare shoulders as they talked about cleaning the gutters, or getting the city to come out and fix the ditches, or the new cupholders Mr. Strauss had installed in his Ford van.

My senior year of high school, Mr. Strauss ran his van into the corner of our fence. He didn't mean to, but his foot slipped on the gas and he jutted out of his carport and barely knocked into it. Not enough to push the fence over. He only broke a few boards. Mr. Strauss was too nervous to tell my mom, so he phoned my dad at work.

"No worries," said my dad. "We were going to replace that part of the fence anyway. Accidents happen."

When I was seven I accidentally got stuck crossing the chain link fence on the far side of my house. I climbed up with binoculars, planning on getting a good view of the street. At the top of the fence, one of the wire hooks cut a whole into my jeans. When I tried to raise myself up any higher, the pants ripped a larger hole. When I tried to sit down, the sharp fence mesh cut into my red thigh. I dropped my binoculars and heard the glass crack on a brick below, but even with another free hand I couldn't unhook myself. After about half an

hour I wet myself. I must have wailed loud enough for Mr. Strauss to hear. He came over, ripped a big hole in my jeans and pulled me off the fence.

"Now Toby," he said, smiling, "why'd you go and get stuck up there? Don't you know fences are for being on one side or the other of?"

The next day he gave me an old pair of military binoculars and told me I could keep them as long as I promised not to climb on the fence anymore.

Mr. Strauss was always climbing something. It's like he was addicted to ladders. If I climbed up on the roof to hang christmas lights, fish leaves out of the gutter, or search for the source of a dead animal smell, Mr. Strauss would inevitably scamper up the ladder and surprise me right when I was looking over the edge of our eaves.

"Now Toby," he would spook me, "you know the trick to cleaning gutters?" He paused and smiled. "Get someone else to do it!"

Half the time he was holding a Diet Coke, so I know he climbed up the ladder one handed.

I think Mr. Strauss and his wife went through a closet full of Diet Coke every week. My mom finally found out that they didn't recycle. She was furious.

"Did you know they just throw everything away?" she asked my dad.

"Not everything. Sometimes Edmond burns plastic in the backyard," said my dad.

"And I think he pours his motor oil straight into the ditch," I added.

My mom devised a system where once a week my sister and I would go over to the Strauss house, collect all of their Coke cans, and dump them in our recycling bins. It worked for three weeks before my mom called it off because their incredible soda intake outmatched

our recycling outtake. I think Mr. Strauss drank more soda during those three weeks to overwhelm us and politely avoid being bothered.

Mr. Strauss proudly told me kept a Smith and Wesson 9mm under his pillow.

"That way I can really bother anyone that tries to mess with my sleep." He said, smiling.

For a while in high school I had a psych rock band that practiced in our garage. I asked Mr. Strauss to let me know if the noise was ever too much or too late at night.

"Now Toby, don't you worry about that," he said. "I've got an alarm clock made by Smith and Wesson. If you ever play too late it will put a hole in your amplifier." He laughed. "That'll quiet things up!"

Unlike Mr. Strauss, Mrs. Strauss was a quiet character. For years I thought she couldn't speak. It turns out you just had to wait a minute or two after asking a question before she would respond. First you would get ninety seconds of head nodding and shaking her wrinkly hands before she said something like "that's nice" or "yes yes yes." I don't think I've ever heard her state an opinion, or fact, or much of anything. Mrs. Strauss was so quiet that the first time she fell, Mr. Strauss didn't notice until the next morning. She broke her hip trying to get to the fridge in the middle of the night. I doubt she even yelled. Mr. Strauss found her lying on the yellow kitchen tile the next day, awake and very still. He managed to get her up and into the car so he could drive her to the hospital himself.

The only times I saw the Strauss offspring was when they came into town to visit Mrs. Strauss after her various hospitalizations. They had a son, whose name I do not know, who only ever came down twice. He had a family in Colorado and spent all winter skiing. I never

met him, only saw the maroon jeep he drove. Mr. Strauss told me he thought his son should look like a prune the way he complains about the humidity down here.

Their daughter, Peggy, didn't have as far to drive. She lived in Austin with her partner, who Mr. Strauss just called Sissy. It took me a few years to figure out that Sissy was not actually a sister. Peggy and Sissy had an adopted son who liked the rusty trampoline in the backyard. Mr. Strauss told his adopted grandson that he could have the station wagon in the backyard when he was old enough to drive.

"Now Toby," said Mr. Strauss, pointing into his backyard, "I sure doubt that that station wagon makes it until that boy can drive. Hell, I bet it don't drive now! But what that boy doesn't know is that I've got a baby blue 1973 Mustang in a storage shed on the north side of town. He sure will be surprised on his sixteenth birthday when I show up with a Mustang for him after talking about a dead station wagon for half his life!"

When Hurricane Ike hit, one of the pecan trees in Mr. Strauss's backyard fell right on top of the roof of his old station wagon. We cut the tree in pieces and hauled it out to the curb with half of Mr. Strauss's yard. The tree left a dent in the roof of the wagon, and Mr. Strauss said he would get someone to tow it to a junkyard, so we left it there and moved on to other debris. My friend Hector drove by in his cousin's Camaro while we dragged trees to the curb. I could barely see his head over the side of the car door.

Ike left us all without power for six days. Mr. Strauss rigged up a generator in his backyard to supply electricity to our two houses. He had two long extension cords, one running into each house, connected to a mesh of daisy chained power strips.

"Now Toby," Mr. Strauss said quietly as he stretched out another extension cord, "back in the day we would have called this 'nigger-rigging,' but we can't call it that anymore. Not just us, they called it that too!" He laughed. "It was a very different time."

I tried to smile, but I didn't quite know how I should react.

We put box fans in our doorways and slept in the hallway with all the windows open. Our house was filled with sweaty summer air and the gurgle of the generator.

The summer before sixth grade I had a big birthday party in our backyard. I hadn't had a party in three years, so my parents went all out. There was a slip-n-slide, a bounce house, pin the tail on the donkey, balloons, a piñata, and ice cream cake. Mr. Strauss came over with his camera to take pictures of me and my grass-stained friends. My big present was a brand new BB gun. After most of the guests had left, my dad showed me how to safely use it. My sister and Mr. Strauss sat and watched as my dad and I took turns popping the party balloons with my new gun.

Mom said she heard a gunshot from the Strauss house six months ago. She was standing in our kitchen, about to take out the compost, when she heard the crack. She looked out the window and there was Mr. Strauss, sitting in his carport, looking rather dazed.

"Edmond, is everything alright?" she called from our side of the driveway.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I'm just cleaning my guns."

"Sounded like one went off," she said, slowly approaching his carport.

"Well, yeah," he said as he rubbed grease onto a spotted rag. "I keep having some problem with this one." He held up his handgun. "Every time I try to open the chamber to clean it, the damn thing goes off. Look there. I've already put three holes in my van."

There was a close pattern of three holes in the chrome bumper on Mr. Strauss's van.

"Edmond, maybe you should have a professional look at that before you hurt yourself."

Mr. Strauss did everything himself. He built his own bug zappers that hung in his carport and hissed all summer. He wired his own car alarm that went off every time a stray basketball bounced into his van. He even made most of his own tools, composites crafted using the parts of other broken tools and whatever he found lying around. He changed his own oil and did all of his own car repairs. I was always impressed by his independence. He even rotated his own tires until he wasn't strong enough to work the jacks and lift up his van.

The last time Mrs. Strauss fell, Mr. Strauss couldn't pick her up. It was late at night, and they didn't want to call an ambulance, so Mr. Strauss just rolled her over onto a blowup mattress and sat by her until daylight. He got my dad early the next morning and the two of them took Mrs. Strauss to the hospital. I didn't see her again after that. She moved to a constant care facility, paid for by their son. I think Mr. Strauss was lonely without her. He spent more and more time puttering around on our driveway. It was impossible to walk outside without catching a brief quip about his time playing soldier or the importance of school.

Mr. Strauss always asked if I was making good grades, even when I was too young to know what grades were. He wanted to know if I was making all A's in second grade. I told him I didn't know, but my teacher really like the diorama I made about Abraham Lincoln.

"Now Toby," he said, "that's great. Just great. You keep up the good work and make all your teachers real happy. You know what they say about happy teachers…" He chuckled and widened his eyes. "You know, I was not the best student. I goofed off too much, spent too much time flirting with the girls. This one teacher, you know, he hated my guts. Every other day he would yell at me, scold me in front of the class. Well one day I made some smart-ass

joke and he put me out in the hall. He said I clearly didn't like his class so I didn't have to go anymore. Each day for two weeks I sat out in the hall during his class. Finally, I got to thinking that it would more fun—and more valuable—to sit in his class and be polite and learn something rather than sit in the hall, not learn anything, and not make any jokes either!" He laughed. "So you be real good in school and behave yourself! Keep your teachers happy and you'll learn more."

I was in my second year of college when Mr. Strauss passed away. My mom called and told me he had a heart attack.

"Even to the very end, Edmond was certainly a surprising person," she said over the phone. "All these years, all this build up, just to go out like any other old man. He had me convinced that he was going to accidentally shoot himself, or fall off the top of a ladder, or run himself over in that huge van. It seemed like he was getting more and more daring near the end of his life, like he was inching towards some grand exit. Fooled us all."

I came back to Houston for spring break to spend time with my family. One morning, I walked over to the Strauss house. For the first time in twenty years, it was quiet. No hissing, no humming, no gurgling, no gunshots, no dog barks. Bright sunlight shone through the holes in the carport roof. I had missed the smell of old motor oil that lingered on their side of the driveway; it reminded me of every time I had ever borrowed a tool from Mr. Strauss. I climbed the chainlink fence and jumped into the backyard. The station wagon was still there. Water pooled in the dented roof. Moisture trickled through a crack and fanned down the window in a V shape. Moss grew in the water's wake. In one of the car seats, between cracks in the tan vinyl, clovers sprung up, rooted in the foam upholstery.

Mr. Strauss's son sold the house. That summer, it was flattened with bulldozers. I watched them tow the station wagon out to the street. It leaked grease, water, and soil across the driveway. By the end of summer, we lived next to an obscene mansion. From our window, you could see stucco, and limestone, and bricks, five kinds of windows and two spires. Eventually, they put up a fifteen foot tall wrought iron fence with french spikes and a brick wall behind it. Mom said that a lawyer bought it for him and his wife to start a huge family in, but then she left him for some other man who had a smaller house and no college degree. He never comes outside.

"At least when he kills himself he will have plenty of rooms to choose from," joked my mom.

Someone bought the lot on the other side of what was once the Strauss house. There are already beams in place and a large cement foundation. It saddens me to see every last trace of Mr. Strauss wiped off our block. Soon there will another McMansion on Peckelmore Lane and our house will be the last holdout, the link connecting the old neighborhood to the new subdivision.

"Now Toby," said Mr. Strauss to me as I stood by the trash cans, "you won't believe it, but when we moved in, there was a field at the end of Peckelmore. Right where the Kroger is now! Can you imagine! Under that parking lot there is a field, buried with all the grass and trees that used to grow there. I used to walk down there with Mrs. Strauss and have picnics. Sometimes you would see a rabbit, or a deer if you were real lucky. The drainage ditch that runs behind Kroger is right where a creek was! You could follow that creek all the way to the Bayou. It's hard to imagine now. Things change. Always things change."

Alpine

I believe I might have been one of the first people to note the disappearance of Camille Robbins. She missed my final exam, which seemed particularly strange given Ms. Robbins' prior academic performance in my class. She consistently scored top marks and turned in truly stellar work. In the classroom, Ms. Robbins distinguished herself from her peers. She always came to class having read the material, ready to answer any question. Her bright smile beamed up at me from the front row of my classroom.

I respected the work ethic of Ms. Robbins so much that I didn't hesitate when she asked me to mentor her research. I knew she would be thorough and put in all the time that scientific research necessitates.

I spent many hours with Ms. Robbins, traipsing about the big bend area, gathering data. I supervised a number of her expeditions and helped her catalogue our observations. Ms. Robbins was researching the effect that trophy hunting may have on the mating and child rearing practices of the Carmen Mountain whitetail deer. She collected data about the deer population's natality from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. She used what she knew about the whitetail's tendencies to scatter, their sightability, and her own visibility bias to achieve a respectable degree of sampling variation.

Let me be clear: this was graduate level research being conducted by an undergraduate student. Ms. Robbins went above and beyond.

The Parks and Wildlife Department noted a decrease in the number of male whitetail deer in the region, possibly due to an increase in trophy hunting. We noticed, during our

observations, a shift in the herding patterns of these deer. More often than not, the herds lacked a stag. The entire stag population had moved farther north into Big Bend and concentrated themselves in one large basin, far from hunting grounds, protected from danger. The does on the other hand still ranged across the region. They traveled in smaller all-female herds, independent of any male influence. During mating season, the females would conduct a curious pilgrimage to the stag's basin, and then, once pregnant, return to their own respective territory.

I don't know much about Ms. Robbins' personal life, aside from the fact that she spent many weekends traveling to Big Bend to conduct her research. I know she was an avid rock climber. She proposed her research hypothesis after multiple sightings of eight or more stags at a time in a basin which she frequently climbed in with her friends. We kept our conversations strictly academic, and entertained each other for hours with tidbits of migration data, recent biological findings, and other factoids from the realm of ecology.

I am truly sorry that she has been missing for so long. It doesn't seem in her nature to run away or voluntarily abscond. She had a vibrant life here at Sul Ross and was on the verge of some incredible academic findings. I hope only the best for her, wherever she may be.

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I was in Terlingua the night I found out that Camille was missing. My boyfriend Ricky and I went down there to spend a weekend mountain biking. Our finals finished up early, so we decided to celebrate. We showed up at the El Dorado late that Friday night and booked a room. We each got an enchilada plate and a margarita on the rocks at the restaurant

downstairs. There was a gross old man with a grey beard and a guitar playing country covers across from the bar.

"If any of you folks are visiting from out of town, welcome to Terlingua!" His spit sprayed into the microphone between sips of beer. "This town is the biggest outdoor, outpatient, mental rehabilitation project in the entire state of Texas!" He laughed at his own jokes. "Tonight is an anything goes kind of night. All the cops from here to Marfa are in Alpine, so feel free to have a drink and drive home feeling good!" He launched into another country song, swaying side to side like a buffalo calling its mate.

After dinner I got a call from Camille's mother. She told me that nobody had seen Camille for four days. She wanted to make sure that Camille wasn't with me on some climbing trip. I told her I was here alone with Ricky. She said to call her if I heard anything from Camille.

I wasn't too worried at the time. Camille was often gone for a few days at a time, climbing or working on research. I figured she might have just forgotten to tell someone.

The next day, Ricky and I went mountain biking. We didn't hear anything more about it until we got back to Alpine. By that time there were already posters everywhere. The first one I saw was in Penny's diner. Right on the door when you walk in. That's when I knew it was serious.

—-

After I got the call, I became frantic. I called every person I thought Millie knew and I called all the people they knew. Nobody had heard anything. Everybody said they would help spread the word.

We put up fliers all over the town, bought ads on the radio, and offered a hundred thousand dollars for any information leading to her location.

I still think it was that boy she had been seeing. He was the only one I called that didn't say 'I'm sorry' or 'that's terrible' during the course of our conversation. He just kept saying 'really' over and over again. I remember him using the phrase 'that's surprising' without sounding surprised. She never talked about him with us. I think he ran with a bad crowd.

I tell the police over and over again about that boy, but they just tell me they are looking into it. Well, they've been looking into it for three months and what have they found? Nothing.

I try not to hold any malice in my heart for that boy or anyone else, however hard that may be. I want to be at peace with the whole thing. Every night I pray for Millie, asking God to bring her back safely to us. I love her with all my heart. Our whole family is still in shock. Three months later and we are still missing such a bright and vibrant piece of our lives.

I still hope she is alive and well, waiting for us somewhere, but lately my prayers have changed. I ask god for peace—for us and for Millie, wherever she is.

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I am sick and tired of hearing about Camille Robbins, ok? I barely knew the girl. After she went missing everyone started calling me her boyfriend. We hooked up once,

maybe twice at a party. Let me tell you, that was the worst timed hookup ever. She posted one pic of us together online and that was it. Her mom, her family, the whole town—they've all been bothering me nonstop since she disappeared.

Don't get me wrong, it's sad. The whole thing is very sad. She was cute and she seemed pretty smart. It's sad anytime somebody goes missing. But how broken up would you be if someone told you a complete stranger had gone missing? I had hung out with her four or five times tops.

Now I get dirty looks all over campus. The whole town hates me. People call me and ask me to just admit to it already. Admit to what? We don't even know what happened. The other day someone keyed my truck. It's been two months and people are still losing their heads over this shit.

You want to know what I think? Talk to that creepy professor she was always hanging out with. Every time I talked to her she mentioned him and the work they did together. They would take trips to Big Bend alone. You know how easy it would be to hit someone over the head with a shovel and bury them anywhere in that park? It's huge. You probably wouldn't even have to bury the body. I bet you could just dump it behind a rock or something and people wouldn't find it for years. Who knows, there could be tons of bodies out there just waiting to be discovered.

I would have liked to have gotten to know Camille Robbins—she was beautiful and full of life—but I never got the chance. The whole thing is horrible, but I wish it was over already. I wish they could just figure out what actually happened so I can move on with my life. You know how hard it is to find a date or meet a girl at a party when the whole town

thinks you're some kind of psycho killer? It's impossible. All I can say is I'm going to expect some big apologies when they finally figure this shit out.

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If I'm being honest with you, really honest, I don't think anyone is at fault for the disappearance of Camille Robbins. Now, I'm not allowed to say that, but we've been working this thing hard for months now, and best I can tell it was purely an accident.

Ms. Robbins clearly had a history of venturing out on her own to potentially dangerous areas of Big Bend. We've had a team sweep the park, but honestly, it would take years to cover every square foot of it.

The community loved Ms. Robbins, which is clear from the huge support we have had in the effort to find her. No one had any reason to cause harm to Ms. Robbins. And everyone we've questioned has offered many things of themselves to aid in her safe discovery and return. We've patrolled the highways, from Marfa to Marathon, stopping every out-of-town car we could. Never has there been any suspicious activity.

I think, most likely, Ms. Robbins suffered a fall somewhere in the park. Sometimes at night I have trouble sleeping. I imagine her at the base of a butte, perhaps paralyzed, bleeding to death on the dry earth. I imagine her thinking of her whole life, her research, the friends and family that loved her so much. I wonder who was the last person she thought about. Did she realize how much her mother would miss her? Was she regretful of a burgeoning romance? If I was Camille, I don't know if I would have thought about any of them. I

probably would have imagined my skin decaying and baking under the hot West Texas sun, my skeleton resting under the shade of a tall butte, and the infinite solitude that awaited me.

I doubt we will ever find Camille Robbins, but I can't say that to this town.

Lake Travis

Everything is loud. Country music blares from waterproof speakers. Ski boats motor back and forth in front of the dock. Large hallways and dining rooms collect laughter and silverware scrapes. Fireworks go off over the water.

There is also space. Long naps on plush outdoor furniture. Floating in the infinity pool overlooking the lake. Riding bikes in the early morning across the country club.

Everyone is afforded the perfect balance of noise and space.

John and Joan Davis enjoy the weekend so much that they buy a vacation house down the street from the Dodds. The houses back up to the same golf course, so Joan Davis and Kathryn Dodd can play a round together, just like in college but now with new last names.

John Davis gets a big dock put in, similar to the one Ryan Dodd has. John sits on the back patio drinking a Shiner. He wipes beer sweat on his khaki shorts and watches the new dock bob in the lake. He and Joan buy a ski boat, two Sea-Doos, and a yellow Sunfish.

The Dodds and the Davises bring their children up to the houses. Everyone laughs as little Meredith Dodd falls over on her water skis again and again. She has the brightest smile and looks picturesque tethered to the back of the boat. John Davis, with a rum and coke in one hand, teaches his son Michael to sail the Sunfish. Michael goes off on long excursions by himself, sailing around the bend of the lake. John Davis looks out at the small yellow Sunfish, its white sail disappearing into the shimmering horizon. The families take long trips across the water to lakefront restaurants. Michael and Meredith ride together in the front of the boat, sitting close together on the seat, sharing a sweater. The wind pulls their hair away from

their faces and begs tears from their eyes. At the restaurant, Michael and Meredith play with their steak before excusing themselves to sit on the dock and watch water bugs skimming across the rippled lake.

Joan Davis has an American Cancer Society fundraiser at the new house. All of their friends from Dallas, Houston, and Austin drive up. There are two catering companies that serve Mexican food and barbecue. A band plays country covers on the back deck, by the pool. A tipsy bartender serves margaritas in the foyer. They raise over $200,000 for cancer research. When Meredith and Michael get tired of the band, they go upstairs to watch a movie. They curl up on the couch beneath a throw blanket.

"Michael, could you ever imagine what life would be like without your family?"

He can feel Meredith's heels rubbing against his shins. "Sometimes," he says.

They fall asleep together under the flashing blue light of the television.

In high school, Meredith Dodd brings her boyfriend up with the families. Meredith and her boyfriend ride around, jumping wake on the Davis's Sea-Doos. Her boyfriend runs over a sandbar and gets flung off, bouncing across the water. The Sea-Doo's jet engine is trashed and her boyfriend has the wind knocked out of him. John Davis and Ryan Dodd swim the Sea-Doo back to the dock.

"Don't worry about it," says John Davis. "This stuff is here for y'all to use. We're just glad you're ok."

Joan drinks red wine with Kathryn and watches their kids chug Shiner on the dock. John cooks steaks and asparagus for Michael and all his high school friends.

Michael and Meredith both get in to The University of Texas. The Dodds and Davises have a graduation party up at the lake.

"Now Michael," says Ryan Dodd after a few drinks. "When are you going to ask out my daughter? She's beautiful and you two have known each other forever."

Meredith joins Kappa at UT. Michael rushes, but none of the fraternities give him a bid. Meredith takes him to her first date event, but Michael feels out of place among all the other guys he rushed with, now pledge brothers with each other.

"Don't worry about it," says Ryan Dodd. "I didn't join a frat and I turned out ok." He sits with Michael on the dock, their feet tickle the water. "You know what they told me? They said if I didn't join a frat, UT would turn me into a democrat. Can you believe that?"

Michael comes out after a year in college. The Davises worry about him. John wants him to take a year off of school. He talks with Joan about sending Michael to a reformation camp. Kathryn Dodd tells them not to worry, it may just be a phase.

Meredith brings half her sorority up to the lake. They sleep in late and drink mimosas. Meredith floats in the warm water. Her toes reach down into the cool mud beneath them all.

John Davis talks about retiring. He's only forty-three, but he is ready to live on the lake. He wants to spend his days playing golf and sailing.

"I could do it now if our property taxes weren't so high," he says one night at dinner. He rocks his crystal wine glass on the marble table. "I mean, I've worked hard for where I am and all I've earned. You'd think the least the government could do is let me keep some of it."

Senior year of college, all of Meredith's friends get married. She goes to a bridal shower every month and her closet fills up with pastel dresses. She asks her mom if it's bad that she might not ever find someone she wants to marry.

"Well you know we'd like grandkids," says Kathryn Dodd, "but honey, you have to do what's right for you."

After college, Michael does a year in the Peace Corps, working on youth development in Ecuador. He takes a camera and compiles a photo journal of all the people he meets. He shows the photos to his parents when he gets back to the states.

"Don't you have any photos with you in them?" asks Joan, holding up a photo of a woman in a bright red poncho.

Meredith takes a year off. She lives at an apartment in Houston and works on medical school applications. She hangs out at the country club, sipping mint juleps by the pool with her old friends from high school. She wonders where they will all end up.

The Davises and the Dodds retire at their lake houses. They spend most mornings together, boating and riding bikes through the countryside.

Meredith doesn't get in to medical school. She gets a job in Houston, teaching Biology at her old high school. The kids love her because she went to school there. They love hearing about UT. Some of the girls ask if she can help get them into Kappa. Other girls ask why she came back to teach.

"For y'all," she says, "to help prepare you for college."

Michael gets in to an MFA program for photography. His parents print one of his landscapes—a expansive photo of one of the Black Lakes of Jumbura—and hang it over the fireplace at the lake house.

After two years working as a teacher, Meredith marries a boy she knew from college. He has a finance degree, a practical smile, and a job at JP Morgan in Houston. They have the wedding at the lake. There are tea lights casting shadows across the lawn and everyone is in blue and white. They set up a stage and a dance floor in the backyard. The Dodd's house fills up with people and liquor and laughter. Across the water the air is heavy and stagnant. Late,

after the reception, Meredith sits with Michael on the edge of the infinity pool, overlooking the party.

"Michael, were you ever interested in me?"

"When we were younger," he says. "But I knew you wanted what our parents have. I wanted something different, even then."

Meredith holds Michael's hand and watches her whole life unfold on the back patio of a beautiful house above a placid lake.

Amarillo

Sabir works in the lumber department at Lowe's. He restocks 2x4s with a forklift. He explains to homeowners why they need to spend extra on treated lumber for their outdoor decks. He scans the rows of beams and boards, looking for the warped ones, picking them out so customers only get the best.

Sabir likes using the panel saw. Often, he is the only employee in the store qualified to operate it. He slides large sheets of plywood onto the saw, upright. Customers consult with him on their home improvement projects. He tells them how to waste the least amount of wood while getting all the sections they need cut. Sabir measures twice, making thin marks with his pencil on the edge of the plywood. He cuts precisely on the line, never crooked, never tearing the wood.

Sabir's wife, Faaria, works at the Family Dollar. She marvels at the strange things people buy, plastic baubles of every color and contortion. Faaria wants to enroll at Amarillo College. She and Sabir save up for tuition.

"One dollar at a time," says Sabir.

Sabir and Faaria own one car, waking up early so they both get to work on time. Wherever possible, they cut costs. Faaria has started to talk about children again. She and Sabir have wanted a child since before they moved to the states, since before her first miscarriage.

"Children are expensive," says Sabir. "A degree, a better job, then children."

At Christmas, Faaria counts the different types of plastic Santa Claus figurines at the Family Dollar. Their cheap paint leaves red flecks on the shelves as she lines them up. Faaria licks her finger and wipes up the flecks. Her fingertip looks like a chicken egg, brown with red speckles.

Sabir and Faaria live next to the Carlesons. Sometimes they see Randy Carleson scraping ice off his windshield in the morning. His red face fills up with a big white smile.

"Merry Christmas!" yells Randy. "How's the cold treating y'all?"

"Same as everyone!" yells Sabir as he scrapes his own windshield.

Sabir and Faaria shiver all the way to work. Sabir's hands shake on the vibrating steering wheel. The car's heater doesn't kick in until Sabir pulls in to the Lowe's parking lot.

Sabir helps a man pick out lumber to build a manger in his yard. The store stays busy before Christmas. Everyone buys lights and trees and gift wrapped appliances. Sabir drinks hot coffee in the break room.

At night, Sabir and Faaria eat lentil soup. They wrap up in a heavy quilt and watch television together, sometimes the news. Sabir keeps his socks on so as not to scratch Faaria's ankles with his sharp toenails.

Randy invites Sabir and Faaria over for Christmas dinner.

"I know you probably don't celebrate, but we'd like to have you over all the same."

They splurge on presents for the Carlesons. A new ice scraper for Randy and a plastic Santa ornament for his family. Faaria watches Cindy Carleson rub her hands over her pregnant belly as she speaks. Cindy Carleson's face glows like yellow christmas lights.

"How long?" asks Faaria, reflecting Cindy's glow.

"It's been seven months, so hopefully not too much longer!" says Cindy. She leans back on the granite countertop. "Women always talk about the moment their child was born as the happiest moment of their life. I think a lot of that happiness is just a result of not being pregnant anymore."

Faaria nods. She tries to smile. "It certainly is a big day."

Everyone holds hands while Randy prays for peace and happiness. Sabir and Faaria sit around the table with the Carlesons, eating turkey and dressing and green bean casserole. Randy asks about their life in Iraq.

"Bet you never had snow like this!" Randy says.

Sabir tells stories about his work translating for the US military. The family laughs when he mentions the absurdities of the American soldiers, how they didn't understand the electric system and often shocked themselves while trying to take a shower. Everyone gets quiet when he brings up the militias and the violence that forced them to leave.

"It put us in a really hard place," says Sabir. He straightens the knife on his plate. "When the Americans left, there was no one to protect us. The militias started threatening us and other families. It wasn't safe anymore." Sabir looks at Faaria, smiling. "But here we are, and very lucky to have neighbors as nice as you all."

Randy stands up to make a toast, bumping the table with his belly. "To Sabir, our very own veteran."

In February, Cindy Carleson has the baby. Randy sends Faaria and Sabir a card with the baby's smiling face on it. His name is Samuel and he has his father's red cheeks.

One night, Faaria sees a report on the television about the Iraq war. The reporter says that one unintended consequence of the war was pollution, high mercury and lead levels in

the water, which may have caused a rise in cancer and birth defects in the region. Faaria wonders if her miscarriage was a result of the war, if the same military her husband worked for had destroyed her child. She presses her thumb into her forearm and watches the skin bulge around it. She wonders if she will get cancer, or if she has it, where it would be.

Sabir and Faaria work extra shifts, going and coming home in the dark. Their days are spent under florescent lights, and at night their eyes are too tired to watch television.

One morning, on the way to drop off Faaria, Sabir hits an ice patch and skids into a large truck. There is a loud pop, like someone jumping on a plastic water bottle, and Faaria lurches forward in her seat, almost hitting the dashboard. The driver gets out and yells at Sabir.

"You people need to learn to drive!"

Sabir quickly unbuckles his seatbelt. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He opens the car door and puts his hands out, as if to brace an impending fall. "I'm so sorry!"

The other driver calms down when he sees that his truck is fine. Sabir apologizes again. Faaria is scared. Her eyes dash back and forth between the man and Sabir.

"It's ok," says the man. "You probably wouldn't have insurance to swap anyway." He gets back in his truck and drives off.

Sabir walks around the front of the car. The sedan's hood is dented, and the bumper is on the ground. Sabir shakes his head at Faaria. He tries four different angles, but he can't fit the bumper into his trunk. He takes Faaria to work and leaves their dented bumper on an icy curb.

Sabir drinks coffee in the break room and wonders if the bumper will still be there when he gets off work. He walks through the aisles, making plans for after work. A customer

asks him which aisle wing nuts are on. Sabir takes the customer to the aisle but he can't find the right size wing nut. They all start to look the same. Sabir buys twine and leaves work early. He goes back to the curb, but the bumper is gone. Sabir takes his time getting back in the car, looking over his shoulder as if the bumper will reappear any minute. He drives to the Family Dollar. He waits for Faaria to get off work, sitting in the sedan, picking apart twine with his fingers. He thinks of Iraq. Sabir remembers another interpreter he used to work with, Aamin, who wasn't lucky enough to make it out after the war. After the Americans pulled out, the militia targeted Aamin and his family because of their association with the United States. They sent threats. Once, a dead dog was left on their doorstep. Nobody would talk to Aamin's wife anymore. They told their children not to leave the house unless they had to. Aamin had applied to come to America, just like Sabir, but his family's paperwork kept getting delayed. Aamin's wife worried more and more. One day, several militia members caught Aamin driving on the highway. They pulled up beside him and ran him off the road. When his car was found, it was perforated with bullet holes. Aamin's wife saw the militia members celebrating Aamin's death in the street.

A knock on the car window startles Sabir. He opens the passenger door.

"Did you get the bumper?" Faaria asks.

"It doesn't matter. I'm just thankful we are safe," says Sabir.

"But what about next time?" Faaria asks. "Will we be safe then? What if you run into another truck?"

"I don't know." He tightens his hands on the steering wheel three times, like a cowboy preparing to ride a bucking bronco. "We will think of something."

Faaria nudges the pile of unraveled twine between her feet.

The roads become less icy. Grass starts to grow up through the hard ground, like stubble. Faaria applies to Amarillo College. She spends every night for a week on the application, working with Sabir. She wants to get an associates degree and certification to become an occupational therapy assistant.

"I'm sure you'll get in," says Sabir. He massages her shoulders, using his thumbs to find knots woven into her muscles. "This is the first step towards a promising future."

Sabir starts seeing flyers around their neighborhood calling people to join an American Watch group. They have statistics about refugee immigration and a graph that shows America being entirely populated by refugees by 2024. In bright red letters the flyers say "Come voice your opinion at the upcoming city council meeting!"

At Lowe's, an older woman wearing a bright red sweater asks Sabir's supervisor for someone else to cut her wood.

"Someone besides the Somali," she says. She doesn't look at Sabir.

Sabir's supervisor tells the woman that Sabir is the only saw operator they have, and perhaps she should go somewhere else for her home improvement needs. She lets Sabir cut her plywood.

"If you get the measurements wrong, I'm not paying for it," she tells him. Her frown sinks back into her round face, creasing her pale skin like tissue paper.

Sabir carefully cuts each sheet, triple checking the measurements with her.

"Have a good day," Sabir calls out to the woman as she shuffles away with her cart full of cut wood.

In May, Faaria gets into Amarillo College. Sabir cooks her dinner: steaming biryani and warm samoon.

"You've done an amazing thing," says Sabir. He holds Faaria's hand across their kitchen table. "I'm so proud of you."

Faaria cuts down on her shifts at the Family Dollar. She registers for summer classes, English composition and speech.

Randy Carleson waters his grass in the front yard. He drinks some of the hose water.

"Gonna be a real hot summer," he tells Sabir. "Do what you can to stay cool!"

Sabir and Faaria wake up early to eat before sunrise. They fast all day. Sabir grows tired in the afternoon and starts to get dizzy lifting lumber. His supervisor tells him to take it easy.

Faaria starts taking the bus to work and campus. She struggles with speech. The students are required to speak in front of class every day.

"Remember to relax," says her instructor. "It's only talking!"

Her nerves get to her, grabbing at her jaw, thickening her accent.

At Lowe's one afternoon, people gather outside in the parking lot. They watch the Walmart Supercenter across the street. There are numerous police cars in the parking lot, even a SWAT truck. The law enforcement personnel wear black helmets and bulletproof vests, like Sabir wore in Iraq.

"What's going on?" Sabir asks a coworker.

"Apparently some kind of shooting or hostage situation," his coworker says.

Sabir's supervisor comes out of Lowe's, beating his hands like a hummingbird, and ushers the employees back inside. Sabir goes back to his department to help a man cut beams for a treehouse. He pauses between the screams of the chop saw to listen for gunshots.

At home, Sabir watches the news with Faaria. They learn that a Somali man pulled out a gun and took hostages at Walmart earlier that day. The man appears to have been an employee of the store. He was shot dead by law enforcement. No other persons were injured.

Sabir walks the smooth concrete floor at Lowe's. He feels the customers' eyes on him. Even his coworkers stare at him with a sense of fear and trepidation. Sabir tries to tell a man that he could save money by using thinner plywood for his project. The man stares back blankly, as if Sabir had just insulted his family.

Sabir and Faaria come home sweaty. They sit on the couch in front of a box fan and eat shawarma with cool vegetables. Sabir wipes tomato juice off his stubbled chin. He worries that they will have to move before she can finish school.

"Everything will be ok," she says. "This is nothing like home."

The summer passes like oil through an eyedropper. Faaria does well in both of her classes. Sabir keeps picking up shifts wherever he can. He spends more time in the break room and less wandering the floor. Sabir convinces Faaria to quit working and take classes full time. Faaria registers for psychology, biology, philosophy, and the first class of the occupational therapy sequence.

Sabir notices people giving him looks as he drives around the neighborhood. They pause their street-side conversations to stare at Sabir with beady eyes. The American Watch group posts more flyers. He hears that they have been attending city council meetings, calling for a ban on Muslim immigration to Amarillo.

"Be careful," says Randy. He bounces his son in his arms and glances around the neighborhood. "Some of these folks might have the wrong idea about you."

Faaria starts classes. She loves the material and studies it vigorously, staying up late into the night while Sabir watches the news. He envies the Carlesons and how easy it was for them to have a child.

On the anniversary of September 11th, Sabir walks out onto his driveway. Someone spray painted the word "Arab" in large letters on both sides of the car. Randy drives him to Lowe's. Sabir tells his supervisor what happened. He gets a day of paid leave and some free spray paint.

"I'm so sorry," says Sabir's supervisor. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Sabir and Randy cover the red sedan's mirrors and windows with plastic trash bags and blue painters tape. They coat the entire car in black spray paint.

"Just like Maaco," says Randy.

The paint pools up in some places and dries thin in others, leaving drips streaking down the sides of the car. Randy tells Sabir to file a police report, but he doesn't want to.

"I'm afraid it will only make things worse," says Sabir.

"At least the black hides the missing bumper," Randy says.

Sabir tells Faaria to be careful, to come straight home from class. Not to go out at night.

In October, the neighborhood children walk the streets in costume, trick-or-treating. Their parents herd them away from Sabir and Faaria's house. Sabir looks out the window at a small boy, tripping over his superhero cape. He imagines his own son, years from now, walking down their street, carrying a pillowcase full of candy.

Sabir watches Randy rake leaves. Randy waves at every car that passes. Sabir remembers Aamin, how afraid he must have been before he died. He wonders what Aamin would have done if he knew the end of his life was so near.

Faaria excels in her classes. She loves occupational therapy, the idea of helping someone participate in meaningful activities. She wants to work with amputees, training them to use prosthetic limbs, helping them readjust.

Winter comes. The landscape turns brown and barren.

Sabir sees Christmas carolers singing at other houses in the neighborhood. They serve hot wassail and butter cookies. The wind whips their red scarves into each other.

Sabir cuts 2x4s for a woman from the church. She wears a knitted Christmas sweater over a long black dress.

"I'm making wooden crosses to go in the front yard of every churchgoing family," she yells over the wining saw.

The Carlesons invite Faaria and Sabir over for Christmas eve dinner. Randy's son babbles about cookies. He laughs every time Sabir makes a face at him.

"Samuel gets sweeter every time we see him!" says Faaria. She loves watching Samuel giggle with Sabir.

The day after Christmas, Sabir and Randy build a swing set together in Randy's backyard, Samuel's Christmas present.

"Maybe one day, little Sabir Jr. can come over and play with Sammy on the swings," Randy says, tightening a bolt with a socket wrench.

"That would be nice," says Sabir. He slides his hand down the smooth links of the chain. "I'm sure they would be great friends."

In January, Lowe's announces that they will be laying off people at the store level as well as some VPs in their corporate office. The employees conjecture about who will go. Sabir's supervisor tells everyone not to worry.

"This may not even effect us," he says. "We are one of the best performing stores in the entire panhandle."

That night, Sabir tells Faaria about the layoffs.

"I'm not worried," says Sabir during dinner. "They will probably just replace some regional executives. Not a big deal."

Spring comes, and Faaria watches Randy put in new grass next door. The sod unrolls across the yard like paint rollers, coloring the ground green one stroke at a time.

In March, Sabir's supervisor is laid off. Sabir shuffles around the store like a prisoner on death row.

"Take care, Sabir," says his supervisor. "Things are changing."

Sabir gives him a hug, tightly gripping his supervisor's starched white shirt. The screams of the chop saw fill the lumber department.

One Saturday afternoon, Randy calls Sabir and Faaria over. In the red juniper in Randy's backyard, there is a nest wedged between two branches. Sabir and Faaria take turns standing on their tiptoes, stretching up to peek into the nest. There are five eggs, sky blue with brown specks.

"They'll be bluebirds one day," Randy says.

"It's amazing how much beauty can come from such small eggs," says Faaria. She wants to caress one of the brittle eggs, feel the specks under her fingers.

"We should probably leave before the mother comes back," says Randy.

Another customer complains about Sabir at Lowe's. Sabir has a new supervisor named Chuck, who has a corporate Lowe's shirt with his name embroidered on it.

"You're making the customers feel uncomfortable, Sabir," Chuck says. "Maybe try not to stand too close. And don't tell the customer anything about what they are buying unless they ask."

In the first week of April, the bluebird eggs hatch. Randy invites Faaria to come look. There are four baby birds in the nest. They chirp and hold their open beaks up in the air. Their down is matted against their small bodies.

"What happened to the fifth egg?" asks Faaria.

"Fell out of the nest," said Randy. "Nature is cruel that way."

Sabir walks the aisles at work. He spends more time arranging lumber and less helping customers. He does his best to be invisible.

Faaria makes good grades in her spring courses. She registers for two summer classes, one is her first practicum. The school helps her secure a training position at Specialized Therapy Services.

In June, Chuck asks Sabir to come into his office.

"Take a seat," says Chuck.

Sabir sits on an office chair covered in blue cloth.

Chuck stays standing. "Sabir, I'm afraid we are going to have to let you go. I'm really sorry." Chuck puts his hands on his hips. "It's nothing personal, just personnel." He smiles.

"But seriously, there is a company wide initiative. We really valued you as an employee. I'd be more than happy to write you a recommendation letter if you need one for anything."

Sabir doesn't say anything, he just nods and stares at the corner of Chuck's desk. Chuck hands Sabir a manila folder.

"The details of your severance package are in here. Let me know if you have any questions." Chuck gives Sabir a halfhearted pat on his shoulder.

At home, Sabir tries to convince Faaria that everything is ok. He is sure he can find another job. He is sure she won't have to take any fewer classes. Sabir tells her about the severance package. Between that and her income from the training position, he thinks they will be ok.

Sabir talks to Randy, standing over his new lawn.

"So sorry to hear that, let me know if you don't find work soon," says Randy. For the first time his red face shows no sign of humor. "I'll keep my eye out for any job postings."

Sabir drives around looking for jobs, but all he finds are American Watch flyers stapled to telephone poles. The flyers ask "are you ready to do something about the problem?" Sabir picks up an application for Walmart.

Faaria works with Dr. Robinson. She shows Faaria how to assist patients with stretches and aerobic exercises. Faaria learns the signs of over stressing joints and ligaments. Dr. Robinson gives her tips on patient care.

"Sometimes, the best thing for rehabilitation is conversation," she says. "Get your patient to open up to you. Ask them how their day was. Usually I can talk them up so much that they forget they are stretching!"

Sabir gets a call from the hiring manager at Walmart, who offers him an interview later that week for a position at the store's loading dock, carrying in merchandise from trucks and taking out trash, expired groceries, and packing materials.

Sabir shows up to the interview early. He answers questions promptly.

"Why did you leave your job at Lowe's?" asks the interviewer, wiggling his red pen between his fingertips.

Sabir looks at the shades of grey around the stark office. "There was a company wide layoff initiative. I had a new supervisor who didn't know me. I was a valued employee."

The interviewer writes down something in red. "We'll get back to you in two weeks," he says. "There are a couple people interviewing for this position."

Two weeks come and go. Randy hires Sabir to help him retile the bathroom.

"This sure is a lot faster with two," says Randy, wiping grout on his blue jeans.

Faaria keeps working at Specialized Therapy Services in the fall. She talks to patients about their lives, their families, old jobs they once had, romantic interactions past, present, and future. Dr. Robinson stops supervising Faaria as closely and lets her help with more patients.

One afternoon, Sabir gets a call from Walmart.

"We chose someone else for the position," says a voice over the phone, "but you can apply again in November, when we'll be hiring seasonal labor for the Christmas rush."

In October, Sabir sells the car for twelve-hundred dollars. He takes a bus to Faith City Mission on 2nd street and waits with other day laborers. Men come in trucks and pick up four or five laborers at a time. Some days Sabir digs post holes for fences, other days spreads mulch and lays paver stones in backyards. He comes home covered in dirt and sweat. He tells

Faaria he will find steady work soon. She rubs his sore muscles and tells him about her patients. One of them, Charles, had a collateral ligament injury in his knee. He's seventy-three years old, and he blew out his knee on a cycling trip from Texas to Canada. He made it to Arizona before his knee gave out.

Sabir rides in the back of a pickup truck with two other day laborers. It takes them out of the city, to a house in Bushland. Sabir stares out at the flat horizon. It reminds him of Iraq, the same shades of brown, the sparse vegetation, the long stretch of road. At the house, Sabir spreads gravel with the other men. He pours bag after bag, raking it level like the earth around him.

In November, Sabir reapplies at Walmart. He interviews with the same employee. Again, Sabir tells him why he stopped working at Lowe's.

"You'll hear back in a week or two," says the interviewer.

Faaria is almost done with her occupational therapy certification. Dr. Robinson says she will write Faaria a recommendation letter for her excellent work.

"And who knows," says Dr. Robinson, "Specialized Therapy Services may even be hiring in the spring."

Sabir gets a call from Walmart and they offer him the job.

Randy invites Sabir and Faaria over for Thanksgiving dinner. They celebrate Sabir's employment and Faaria's upcoming graduation. Randy raises his glass to make a toast.

"To good things, big and small!" He gestures towards his son and gives Sabir a wink.

After dinner, little Sammy runs around in his socks and hits his temple on the kitchen table. He sits down on the wooden floor and starts bawling. There is blood in his blonde hair. Randy takes Sammy, still crying, to the hospital. Sabir and Faaria go home to a cold house.

Sabir goes through training at Walmart. He learns how to check inventory forms and the warehouse layout. He is taught how to operate a forklift by an employee that barely knows how to operate a forklift. He misses the smell of lumber and sawdust as he passes the dumpster, entering and exiting the loading dock. It reeks of smashed eggs and wilted produce.

In December, Faaria earns her certificate. Specialized Therapy Services asks her to stay on over the winter as a full time employee.

Sabir and Faaria buy a used sedan on loan. They get a Volvo for the safety features. They imagine a carseat in the backseat. They drive around the neighborhood looking at Christmas lights. The American Watch group flyers flutter under street lamps.

The Carlesons move away after Christmas. They pack up all their lights and decorations and furniture. Randy throws a big going away party. Sabir and Faaria sit on his couch and listen to Randy entertain a small crowd.

"I was practically broke when we moved in here," he says. His face is purple like the wine in his hand. "Well I've worked pretty hard and earned some money since then, so I figure it's about time I buy a bigger place and be broke again!" He laughs with his friends.

Faaria watches the movers carry couches and shelves and chairs out of the Carlesons' house.

After the holidays, Sabir's supervisor sits him down and tells him they don't need him in the warehouse anymore, but there is a restocking position open if he would like it.

"I would like that very much," says Sabir. "Thank you for thinking of me."

Sabir walks down the aisles of Walmart, pulling goods to the front of their shelves: a television, some plungers, a box fan. After the store closes, he brings products from the back of the store to refill the places of those purchased that day.

During dinner, Faaria says she doesn't want to wait any longer.

"My health is not going to get any better," she says. "The younger I am, the better the chance we can have a healthy child."

"Ok," says Sabir. He breathes slowly, like an olympian preparing for the high jump. "Ok. Ok. I'm ready if you're ready."

At work, Sabir gets cold looks from customers as they pass through the store. He smiles at them, but they shudder, turn, and leave. They look at him as if he were a bully they knew in middle school.

Everything is white. The ground, the sky, Faaria's breath as she scrapes frost off the sedan.

One day at work, Sabir looks up from a display of plastic dishware and sees a large man in a brown jacket staring at him in the middle of an aisle. The man shakes his head side to side.

"No fucking way," says the man.

Sabir goes to the back of the store. The man's eyes follow him all the way.

After work, Sabir puts his things in his locker, clocks out, and waits behind Walmart for Faaria to come pick him up. He keeps his hands in his pockets and shivers in the cold. A black truck pulls up behind the store. The headlights blind Sabir for a moment before the engine cuts. The night is quiet. Two men get out of the truck. The larger one wears a brown jacket.

"Hey Mohammed, you like working at Walmart?" the man asks. They walk towards Sabir.

Sabir's thoughts stumble over each other.

"Why don't you get a job somewhere else, huh?" asks the man. He walks faster.

Sabir steps backwards.

"I remember your friend that used to work here," says the man. "I read about the shit he tried to pull."

Sabir starts to backpedal, but the men are already on top of him. They push him to the ground. He falls on the asphalt, struggling to get his hands out of his pockets. Sabir rolls to the side and rocks forward, trying to sit up, but the man punches him in the nose. Sabir puts his arms in front of his face. The man hooks him in the eye and again on the side of the head. The other man kicks him in the side, again and again. Sabir is suddenly hot all over. He curls up to protect himself. He imagines Faaria finding him dead behind Walmart. Warm blood runs down his nose.

The men stop attacking Sabir. "The police killed your friend when he tried to start some jihadist shit," says one of the men. "I swear to God, if you ever try anything, we'll kill you too. You tell that to all your Al-Qaeda buddies, ok?"

Sabir's whole body shakes on the asphalt.

"Arab piece of shit," says the man in the brown jacket. He spits on the ground as he walks back to his truck.

Faaria shows up fifteen minutes later. Sabir sits on the curb behind Walmart. The blood from his nose is cold, hard, and caked onto his stubbled chin. Faaria starts crying when

she sees him. She gets out of the car and runs to him, touching his face, holding him, looking at each of his bruises.

"I don't want to have any children," says Sabir.

He eases his aching body into the sedan. Faaria cries all the way home.

Oakville

Doves migrate south every year starting around September. On September 23rd, the opening day of dove season, we are waiting for them.

We drive down from Houston, Austin, San Antonio, La Grange, Eagle Lake, and Georgetown. We stay at the Eagle's Den Suites in Three Rivers. The night before the hunt, we grill steaks and drink beer. We stay up late getting drunk and showing each other the new shotguns our wives didn't approve of us buying. We laugh about the time Craig Campbell slept in and missed the morning hunt. It was such a great hunt that we didn't even notice he was missing. Jeff Coon always tells the story about the time he got busted by the game warden. The GW drove onto our lease just after the morning hunt. He got out of his truck wearing jeans and a faded green shirt, right as Jeff was bragging about how many of the 'little doves' he shot. The GW said they weren't mourning dove, they were inca dove, and they were going to cost him four hundred dollars apiece in fines. He always ends the story with, "so now I look twice before I pull the trigger!"

A couple years ago, I drove down with John Reynolds. We go to the same church, Second Baptist. He's getting up there in age, but he still enjoys hunting as much as ever. He was kind enough to bring me out to a duck hunt last year at his place on Eagle Lake, so I invited him out to our opening day hunt. The whole drive down John smoked thick black cigars out of the open window. He smelled like tobacco and beef jerky. He told me the same story three times, about his grandson getting a masonic lodge scholarship. In between tellings

he let his white hair bounce on the headrest and stared out the window at passing mesquite trees.

After the first night of normal revelries, we woke up early the next morning, drank coffee, and drove out to the lease before the sun came up. The morning hunt was fantastic. Half of us got our limit. Jeff Coon only shot one inca dove, which he threw into the brush. We sat under the knotted mesquite trees and cleaned the birds, ripping off the wings and throwing them into a black trash bag. John only got two dove, so I cleaned his with mine. I think he spent most of his time smoking by the trucks.

We went to Van's for lunch. They have the best barbecue in the whole state of Texas. We ate helping after helping of brisket, sausage, and ribs on yellow wax paper. They brought out styrofoam cups with charro beans, potato salad, and barbecue sauce. Craig Campbell ate the most. He always does.

After lunch, we headed back for the evening hunt. The doves were flying low and slow, coming in close, four or five at a time. Everyone limited out for the day, except John. He only got one.

"Don't shoot like I used to," said John, sitting down on a folding camp chair.

"That's ok," I said, "we are just happy to have you here."

We sat around the trucks cleaning birds. I rinsed the feathers off my hands with a water bottle and put two ziplock bags full of clean breasts into my cooler. I drank a Shiner and listened to Jeff Coon tell the inca dove story again. Craig Campbell walked around with a bottle of Bulleit whiskey, pouring drinks for whoever wanted one. John leaned against my truck, scratching his stubble, smoking a cigar, sipping whiskey. We all swapped stories until the sun had fully set. I gave John the keys to my truck so he could stay behind with the

others, and I drove back early with Jeff Coon so I could start grilling dinner at the Eagle's Den.

I got a call just as the steaks were ready.

"You better come back," said Craig over the phone. "John had an accident."

Jeff drove me back to meet them on the side of the road. The left side of my truck looked fine as we pulled up. John was smoking a cigar, leaning against the bumper. He stood up quick when he saw us.

"I'm real sorry about the truck," said John. "I swear, there must have been a rock in the road or something back there. It felt like a real big bump."

I walked around the side of the truck. Both hubcaps were torn off, the front tire was flat, the wheels had gouges and cuts in them, and the paint on the lowest two feet of the truck had been scraped off. The steel streaks were blue under Jeff's headlights. John wobbled a bit as he stared at the wreckage.

Craig pulled me aside. "John might have had a few too many drinks."

"Looks like you hit the bridge," yelled Jeff from beyond his truck. "There are silver streaks all across the right barricade."

"I don't think I hit a bridge," said John. "Felt just like a big bump to me."

I had to turn the steering wheel of my truck sideways to get the wheels to point straight. The alignment was completely off. Jeff took John and me back to the motel. We called Triple A the next day.

John never came on another hunt. He said sorry to me every Sunday for three months.

This year we all came down for the hunt, just like normal. Craig Campbell told the story of how he drank to much one year, slept in, and missed the hunt. Jeff Coon told us about the time he paid four hundred dollars apiece for some inca dove he couldn't eat. Everyone asked me to tell the story about the the church geezer who wrecked my truck. I oblige them, year after year after year.

AFTERWORD

Don Graham begins *State of Minds*, his collection of essays on Texas, by stating, "Perhaps another state honors its writers more than Texas, but if so I don't know which one."[1] Graham is correct in acknowledging this attitude. Texas uniquely values the literature it produces, creating a canon within the subset of American fiction (although, many Texans would probably consider the Texas canon equivalent to or greater than the canon of American and English literature). This canon is only around two hundred years old and consists of fiction written by Texans almost entirely about Texas.

The first person to attempt to chronicle the Texas literary canon was J. Frank Dobie in 1943 with his publication *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest*.[2] Dobie's commentary on Texas writing contains chapter headings such as "Fighting Texians," "Mountain Men," and "Range Life: Cowboys, Cattle, Sheep."[3] In the final chapter of this publication, Dobie lays out a set of themes for future Texas writers, including "The Tradition of Cowboy Gallantry," and "Around the Chuck Wagon: Cowboy Yarns Stretching the Blanket."[4]

In 1981, A.C. Greene made a similar attempt at canonization when he published a book titled *The Fifty Best Texas Books*.[5] In an article for *Texas Monthly* by the same name,

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[1] Don Graham, *State of Minds: Texas Culture and Its Discontents* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), 1.

[2] J. Frank Dobie, *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* (Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1943).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] A.C. Greene, "The Fifty Best Texas Books," *Texas Monthly*, August 1981.

Greene explains his choices and states that "Texas has needed more positive criticism, more outspokenness from within, with regard to its own culture. […] Texas has relied too long and too completely on the opinions of outsiders."[6] Naturally, the first book on the list is *Coronado's Children*, by Frank Dobie.[7]

Don Graham continued this tradition of canonization in an article he wrote for *Texas Monthly* in 1996, titled "Canon Fever", in which he lists his top twenty contemporary books about Texas.[8] The list spans from 1980 to 1995 and notes writers such as Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry.

Throughout all the scholarship on Texas writing, certain names appear over and over again—McMurtry, McCarthy, Dobie, etc—along with common themes. Don Graham admits that "cattle, cactus, and cowboys define most people's idea of the major motifs of Texas literature" (he goes on to add 'cotton' to his alliterative assertion).[9] It's true that the majority of fiction about Texas involves ranching, gunslinging, and a romanticism of life in the old west. Even Graham's list of contemporary (circa 1996) books features a majority of books with western thematic content.[10] Almost all of these stories involve a strong male hero setting out to tame the wild west.

In the introduction to his list for *Texas Monthly*, Graham states that "In the old days, for better or for worse, everybody agreed upon the canon of Texas writing. It was largely a

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Don Graham, "Canon Fever," *Texas Monthly*, March 1996.

[9] Graham, *State of Minds*, 41.

[10] Graham, "Canon Fever."

man's world, headed up by Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb."[11] It seems that not much has changed from "the old days." Although some of his selections delve into more diverse thematic material, most of the authors on Grahams contemporary list are men writing about traditionally masculine experiences in rural settings.[12] Mary Karr is one of the three female writers that made it onto Grahams list, and he does give her credit for her language and "unforgettable characters" in *The Liars' Club*, but these are the exact same characteristics of Karr's writing that Graham bashes in his essay "The Pits."[13] Graham, rather condescendingly, accredits all of Karr's success to feminists ready to read about "how it was growing up female in good-ol'-boy country," chanting "You go girl […] like a chorus in in discussion groups at the big book chains."[14] Similar condescension can be found in Graham's explanation of why he chose Sandra Cisneros for his canonical list. Graham writes, "In these stories, Texas' leading Chicana author explores in politically correct fashion the feelings and put-upon lives of passionate Hispanic women living in an Anglo world."[15] He goes on to call her MacArthur prize "an empowering gift from the (Anglo) gods," as if using a parenthetical conceals his disparaging attitude toward fiction focused on Hispanic women.[16]

The consistent selection and canonization of certain writers (Frank Dobie, Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy) and nonrecognition of other writers (Lucia Berlin, Oscar Casares, Mary Karr, etc) demonstrates an academic predilection for fiction that romanticizes

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Graham, *State of Minds*, 71.

[15] Graham, "Canon Fever."

[16] Ibid.

cowboy narratives and heroic male figures. Frank Dobie, in the Spring of 1930, taught the first course focused on literature of the Southwest (read Texas).[17] Don Graham describes how each semester, Dobie's course culminated in a collection of stories written by the students, which "each sounded like little Dobies. The titles of the individual pieces included "cougar tales My Grandma Told," "The Story of Juan Torres," "Dulco, the Cutting Horse," "Down the Road Lived Bigfoot Wallace," "Buried Treasure in Central Texas," and "The Cowboy's Philosophy.""[18] Cleary, the course was aimed at preservation of a specific mode of Texan fiction. Graham states that Dobie's course "rolled on and was imitated at other colleges and universities in the Southwest and the West," spreading Dobie's literary aims.[19] Graham asserts that "Dobie's attempts at canon-formation influenced writers like A.C. Greene, whose "The fifty Best Texas Books," excerpted in *Texas Monthly*, stimulated useful discussion for a decade or more."[20] Today, Don Graham teaches the descendent of Dobie's class, now titled "Life and Literature of Texas." Graham claims that "Were Dobie to come back today, he would find the course much changed perhaps, but he would also find the same ongoing critical effort."[21] Graham's syllabi over the past several years of teaching the course do look significantly different from Dobie's syllabus, and the course title has changed; however, the critical lens with which the course examines Texas literature appears identical. Most years, Graham changes up one or two of the books he teaches; however, Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* are always present on the

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[17] Graham, *State of Minds*, 59.

[18] Ibid, 60.

[19] Ibid, 62.

[20] Ibid, 62.

[21] Ibid, 63.

syllabus. This choice shows the careful dedication to narratives set on ranches. One of Graham's other most commonly used books is Philipp Meyer's *The Son*. Teaching Meyer is certainly an interesting choice for Graham. Meyer is not a native of Texas or the Southwest (a diversion from the original focus of Dobie's course), but instead hails from New York. Times critic Janet Maslin wrote a review of *The Son* titled "The Glory and Brutality of a Purebred Texan Clan," if that gives some idea of Meyer's portrayal of Texas.[22] Graham's choice to teach Meyer over other contemporary Texan writers shows a preference for studying narratives with traditional Texan themes over studying narratives about contemporary Texas.

I first realized how much Texas exported these kinds of narratives when I was in middle school. I went to a Boy Scout summer camp in Colorado. There were close to fifty Boy Scout troops from across the United States. My troop was one of two or three from Texas. At one point, the hot water heater broke at our campground, so our troop divided up, and we were each assigned another troop to shower with for the rest of the camp (at the camp's elevation, it still got down to twenty degrees fahrenheit in the summer, so nobody was going to take a cold shower). I was assigned to a troop from Michigan. It was not until middle school, when waiting in line for the showers with ten kids of my age from Michigan that I realized I was Texan. The first thing I noticed was my accent compared to theirs. Then, they asked me about my life as a Texan. One boy asked if I rode a horse to school. Another wanted to know if everybody walked around the street with guns out. I was surprised by their notions of Texas.

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[22] Janet Maslin, "The Glory and Brutality of a Purebred Texan Clan," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2013.

Even in today's society, Texan stereotypes such as these are prolific. A recent article for the Houston Chronicle examining the portrayal of Texans mentioned such stereotypes as riding horses to work or school, wearing boots and cowboy hats, loving guns, and living in the country.[23] It's not hard to imagine where many of these stereotypes come from when considering the popularity of shows like *Dallas*. Don Graham describes the cultural reach of *Dallas* in his book *State of Minds*:

> The stats about *Dallas* are worth a brief doffing of one's stetson. The show ran for over a decade, from April 2, 1978 to May 3, 1991. It was the top-rated program on TV in 1980-1981 and 1981-1982, second in 1982-1983, number one again in 1983-1984, and number two in 1984-1985.[24]

Graham explains how the creator of the show, David Jacobs, had no firsthand knowledge of Dallas and instead imagined "the city of Dallas as an "Arena for saga, at once a big city and a redneck town, a place with right and wrong sides of the track—one populated by barefoot bumpkins and the other side by millionaire bumpkins.""[25] Graham anecdotally remembers how a woman on a plane asked him about Southfork, the setting of *Dallas* and much of Graham's childhood:

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[23] Jessica Hamilton, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Texan Stereotypes," *The Houston Chronicle*, June 23, 2016.

[24] Graham, *State of Minds*, 160.

[25] Ibid, 158.

> When I told her the whole Southfork think was a myth, she didn't believe me. Finally I told her what she wanted to hear: that indeed my family owned a ranch and that we had made obscene amounts of money from the oil wells on our expansive prairies. She was happy then, and by that time we were landing at Heathrow and she could tell her family and friends that she had met a real Texan, a person of property, drawl, and sprawl. [26]

Dallas misappropriated Texas culture for a primetime soap opera, which would inform millions of American's views on what it meant to be Texan. Graham comes to a similar conclusion, stating that "the TV show *Dallas* westernized us all, and now Collin County has a mythology it can embrace: oil, cattle, big money—none of which reflect the real history of the county."[27]

What's interesting is that Graham recognizes this misappropriation of Texan culture and its propagation of Texan stereotypes, but he practices the same kind of propagation through his curriculum. By primarily studying traditional old west ranch narratives as well as writers from other states that write about these kinds of Texas stories, Graham chooses to propagate stereotypes about Texas culture rather than explore new, complex, and nuanced Texan narratives. By limiting the canon to similar kinds of narratives, Graham, as well as other canonizing scholars, limit exposure and propagation of knowledge about Texas to the commonalities of those narratives.

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[26] Ibid, 25.

[27] Ibid, 25.

The process of canonization seems to be a kind of double edged sword. Although canonization may today be an impediment to understanding the true nature of Texas, initially, writers and scholars attempted canonization exactly for the purpose of sharing an understanding of the state. Frank Dobie, the first to attempt compiling a Texas canon, was a firm believer in this academic aim. Graham states that "It was Dobie himself who made the most eloquent case of the study of regional culture."[28] In the essay "How My Life Took Its Turn," Dobie wrote:

> If people are to enjoy their own lives, they must be aware of the significances of their own environments. The mesquite is, objectively, as good and as beautiful as the Grecian acanthus. It is a great deal better for people who live in the mesquite country. We in the Southwest shall be civilized when the roadrunner as well as the nightingale has connotations.[29]

Graham also notes Dobies defence of regional study in the introduction to the collection of essays and stories by Dobie's students; Dobie says, "I have not ceased to din into your ears the idea that any literature, art, architecture, or even music that the Southwest can hope to achieve, will, if it is 'authentic,' reflect the backgrounds of its setting."[30] Dobie clearly valued the culture of Texas and the Southwest, and his chief academic aim was celebrating those writers that captured that culture.

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[28] Ibid, 5.

[29] Ibid, 5-6.

[30] Ibid, 60.

Many Texan writers write for with this same aim in mind. William Owens commented on the importance of regional writers exploring their own region in the opening of *This Stubborn Soil*, his autobiographical account of growing up in Pin Hook, Texas:

> If one was born in Paris or London or New York, or even in Dallas, to name a place closer to home, he has, when writing about himself, only to mention the city and the reader pictures place, buildings, people and he can ho ahead to particulars about himself and his family. But since I was born in Pin Hook, Texas, a place whose character has not been made known to the world generally, I must begin by writing all I know or ever heard about it.[31]

Owens, writing in 1966, makes a good case for the study of narratives set in lesser known locales. One could easily imagine Dobie making a similar argument for writing about the entire state of Texas thirty years earlier. When Dobie was writing, Texas culture was much less removed from ranch and cattle narratives. Texas had only been a state in the Union for about eighty years, and while cities like Dallas and Houston were well established, much of west Texas remained largely untouched; large scale agriculture didn't begin in the High Plains until 1920.[32] Because of Dobie's cultural and temporal approximation to actual cowboy, ranch, and cattle narratives, his attempt at canonization was in line with his view of the region at the time. However, as Texas has changed over the years, the canon has not. The narratives on Graham's most recent canonical list bear a striking resemblance to those on

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[31] William Owens, *This Stubborn Soil* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 1.

[32] "The 20th Century," Texas Almanac, accessed April 26 2017, http://texasalmanac.com/topics/history/20th-century.

Dobie's list, but the cultural landscape of Texas is drastically different today. Contemporary Texas literary scholarship is focused on preserving and maintaining an outdated cultural portrait of the state, rather than exploring unique contemporary culture. In this way, Graham is perhaps wrong that his course follows Dobie's original academic aim, as it focuses more on heroic cowboy narratives than new narratives exploring the state.

Graham includes a quote from A.C. Greene's *A Personal Country* in the introduction to his book *State of Minds*: "The ability to identify so much with one's place of birth is becoming rare in American culture […] we are losing sectionalism, not just in its less desirable ways but in its meaningful sense."[33] Greene may be right; 5.9 million people moved to Texas from 2005 to 2013, and this influx of people definitely effects the way people born in Texas perceive their own culture.[34] Now more than ever, Texas is culturally connected to the rest of the United States. But this isn't something to be feared, rather, we should celebrate the changes in Texan culture and constantly explore what the implications are for Texan identity.

The most recent attempt at canonization—or perhaps an attempt to stop canonizing —was by John Phillip Santos in an article for *Texas Monthly* titled "Against the Canon." Santos states that "in an ever more diverse and burgeoning Texas, exactly which books merit inclusion, and how such a canonical list might be serially ranked, will vary vastly from reader to reader."[35] He argues that "the age of canonical pronouncement has passed," and instead each reader must create her own lists and "be ready to argue for them."[36] Santos provides an

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[33] Graham, *State of Minds*, 4.

[34] Alexa Ura and Jolie McCullough, "Texas Drawing Millions Moving from Other States," *The Texas Tribune*, April 20, 2016.

[35] John Phillip Santos, "Against the Canon," *Texas Monthly*, November 2014.

[36] Ibid.

elegant solution to the problem of an inclusive canon, and he may be right about the end of authoritative canonization; however, the traditional canon is still used for academic study.

Santos says that he is "keen to find those books that, side by side, limn the improbable, contradictory human epic that is the grand story of Texas."[37] One can imagine the same quote coming from Frank Dobie nearly one hundred years ago. Texas has always been a unique geographic canvas on which to paint colorful characters and rich narratives. During Dobie's time the culture framed the canvas in a manner conducive to painting heroic cowboys and romantic tales of western lore. Today, that cultural framing has changed, and the canvas may better portray equally heroic single parents and struggling immigrants, complex Texan characters both young and old. In no way should new narratives disparage the old; contemporary Texas tales owe everything to the state's foundation of folklore which they rest upon. It is an important academic project to preserve historical notions of Texas and celebrate the culture of its past, but this project becomes problematic when it crowds out contemporary literature and propagates outdated stereotypes rather than explore new ways in which Texans wrestle with their identity. Texas is full of diverse characters, few of which today are cowboys. There are many different ideologies in the state, and they are all connected to each other by one geography. Put simply, it is a disservice to the wonder that is Texas to only depict it in terms of cowboys, cactus, and cattle.

[37] Ibid.

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Special thanks to Elizabeth Dubois, Elizabeth McCracken, Laurie Saurborn, Aaron Chavez, and everyone else that took time to read these stories. Thanks as well to Plan II and the Walkers for awarding me a Jim W. Walker Excellence Thesis Grant, providing for my travels and research. Also, thanks to my parents: where would I be without y'all.